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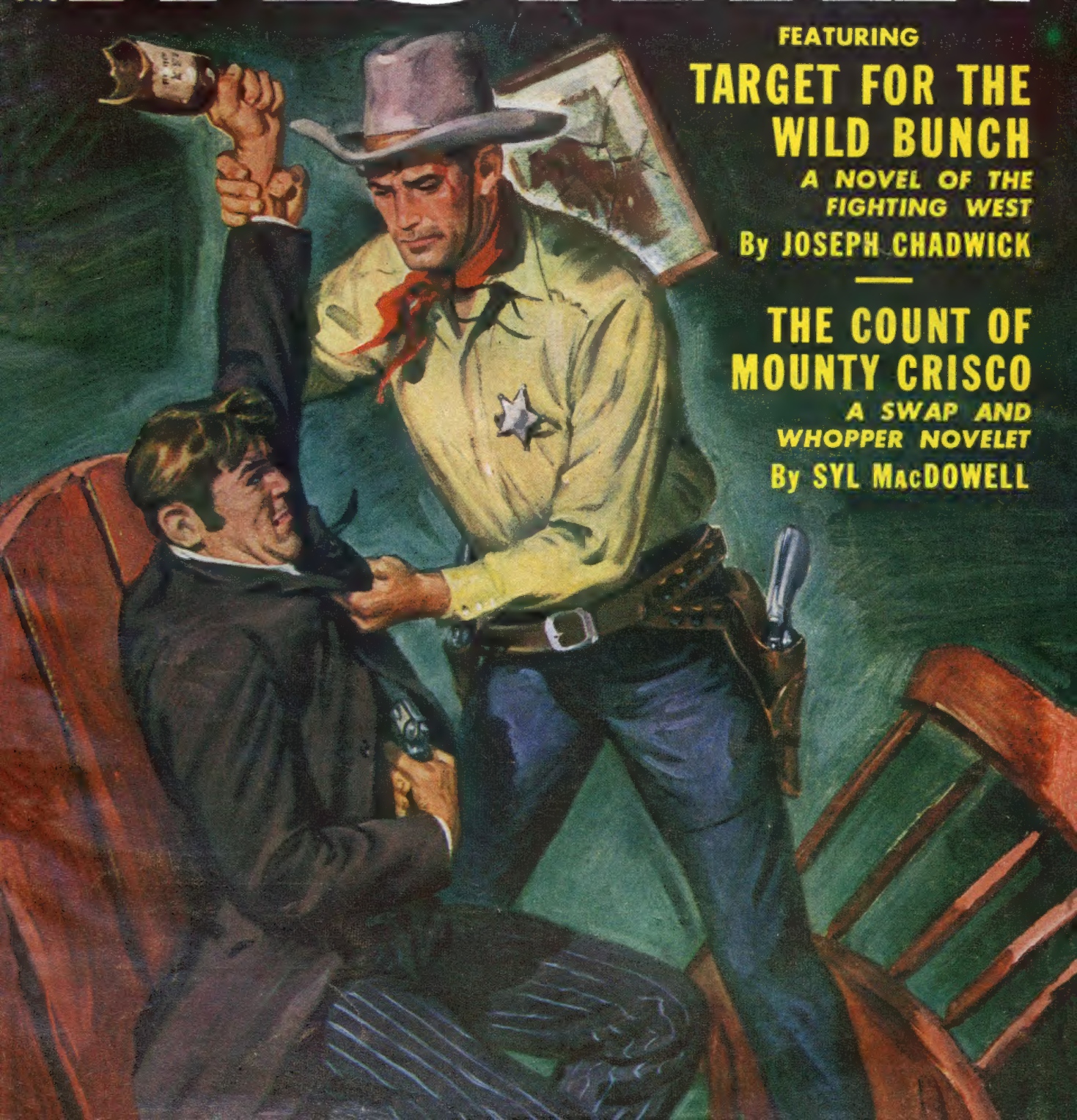

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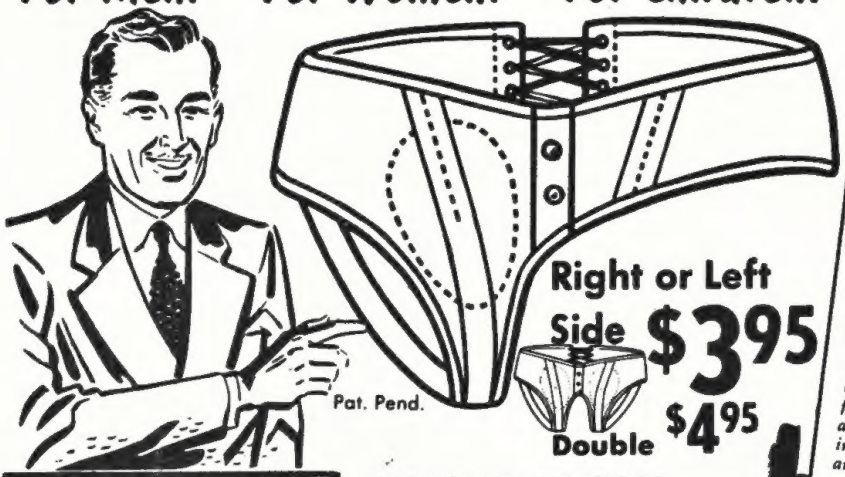

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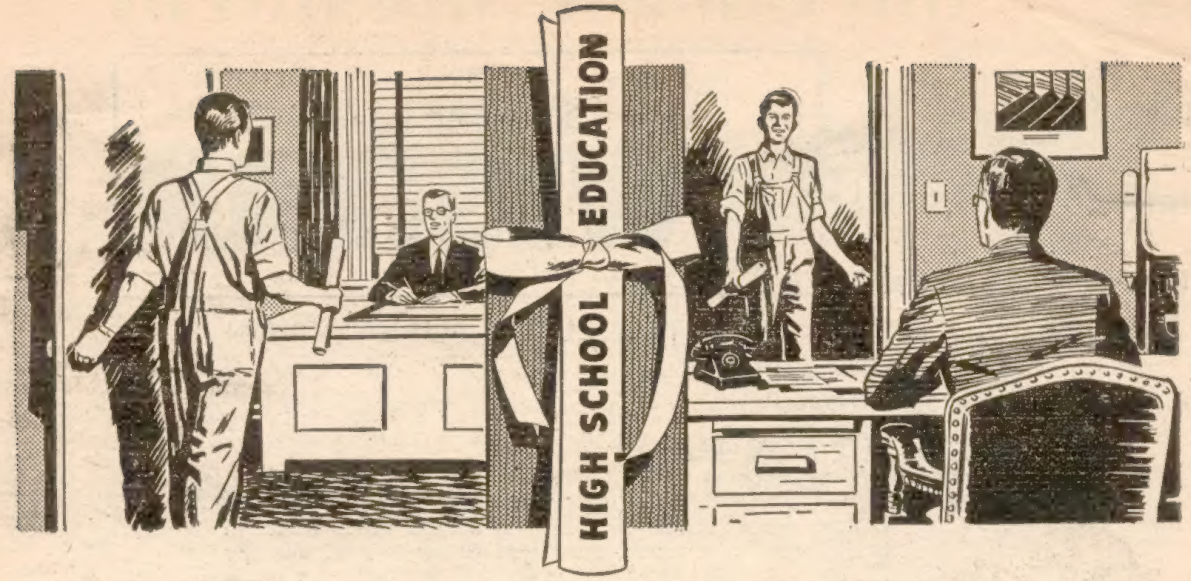

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THRILLING WESTERN

MAY, 1952

Vol. LXVI No. 2

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

A Complete Full-Length Novel

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MORRIS OGDEN JONES, *Editor*

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JINX CITY

The Story of a Town That Dreamed Big Dreams

By CURT FERRIS

STRANGE and grim were the dreams that brought the little city of Corinne, Utah, into existence in the late 1860s. A sleepy hamlet of less than five hundred population today, it is difficult to imagine that Corinne once hoped to replace Salt Lake City as the capital of Utah. But from the first, the town was jinxed.

Utah, from the early 1850s, was Mormon country—a country with a future as bright as the hopes and dreams in the hearts of the Mormon pioneers. But even in this new desert country, the followers of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young had competition in empire building from some who were non-Mormon. One of these was Mark A. Gilmore. On a day in 1868 he stood with some companions on the west bank of the Bear River, and he spoke aloud his dreams as he watched Great Salt Lake stretching before him.

"We must see to it that a great Gentile city arises here someday. Steamboats will bring the ores from northern mines across the lake to this city, which will be the major railway junction. And someday the capital of Utah."

In time, the others saw these things, too, and they acquired land and induced the powerful Union Pacific railroad to survey a townsite, taking as compensation every other lot. The idea caught the imagination of many Gentiles (non-Mormons) and within two weeks a crude, rough town of some three hundred shanties and tents mushroomed into being. Lots sold from three hundred dollars to one thousand dollars each.

The name Corinne was adopted for the new contender as capital of Utah. Named for a glamorous actress, Corinne LaVaunt, some say. Others maintain that it was named for Corinne Williamson, daughter of the first mayor, a child whose golden hair greatly intrigued the local Indians. They offered to buy her from the parents. Fearful that they might kidnap the child, the mother sheared the girl's golden locks and presented them to the braves. This proved satisfactory to the Indians!

In 1870 Corinne was recognized by the Territorial Legislature. It flourished in other ways, too. It had become freighting headquarters for the more or less isolated Idaho and Montana mining towns. One outfit had eighty freight wagons in use on the rough northward roads, and it appeared that Corinne might tie up most of the freighting business.

A smelter was built by General Patrick Connor, military commander in Utah, and the refined ores from the northern mines, from Idaho and Montana, were shipped eastward by rail, as the Union Pacific railroad had been completed.

The town flourished in other ways, too. Since Mormon towns did not welcome riotous construction crews and freighters, these reckless, pleasure-seeking individuals came to the burg on the Bear. Corinne provided for them in a generous way: There were, at one time, twenty-

nine saloons, two dancehalls, and a gambling casino; and it had, too, according to editor John H. Beadle of the Corinne *Reporter*, around eighty dancehall "ladies."

Corinne had another appealing feature —divorces for $2.50, signed and sealed through the efforts of two lawyers. Amazingly, neither husband nor wife had to be present to secure the divorce; and amazingly, too, it took the United States courts only ten years to unscramble the mess this easy marital situation had caused.

Later, an enterprising citizen added allure in the form of bottled "Golden Youth," a distilled mineral water. Chemical analysis proved that the concoction had some value—it was mostly epsom salts!

Corinne had culture by 1870 in the form of an opera house. To celebrate its opening the town was thrown open to all, and free meals were paid for by the local citizenry. A town-tamer had been hired earlier since there was a need to keep some order in this fair Gentile city. And it was orderly on Sunday, too, according to Editor Beadle, who said the men went hunting and fishing and the girls had a dance or got drunk!

The dream of steamboats on Great Salt Lake became a reality with the building of the *City of Corinne*. A stern-wheeler, the *Corinne* was seventy feet long, had three cargo decks, and the engines came from Chicago and the redwood from California. Other boats followed—the *Kate Connor*, *Rosie Brown* and the *Pluribustah*. The bustling town became known as the Chicago of Utah. And despite the facts of its sinfulness, the New York *World* stated: "Congress proposes removing the capital of Utah from Salt Lake City to Corinne, which, containing but few Mormons, is deemed a fitter place to put the military corps in."

FROM the first, Corinne had been opposed by Brigham Young and his people. It stood for all the moral and physical disorder that the Saints kept from their towns, and except for one man, General Patrick Connor, the town might have died earlier. Connor, as military commander of Utah, was a powerful force not only in Utah, but in Washington. He foresaw great wealth in the development of Utah mining, since the Mormons had not taken

[*Turn page*]

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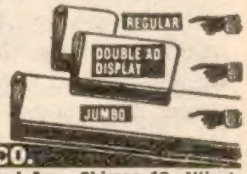

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much interest in digging for metals. So he told his some three hundred California-Nevada volunteers to prospect for precious ores. They did, with gusto. Strike after strike was made, and thousands of gold-fevered people flocked to Utah.

When he wasn't busy corralling Indians —witness the Bear River battle, where almost two hundred and fifty Shoshones were killed—he was promoting Utah mining. Any and all who wished to come to the territory had the protection of his soldiers and their cannons set up at Fort Douglas above the Mormon-dominated Salt Lake City. Desiring political power as well as commercial power in transportation and mining, Connor organized the Liberal Political Party in 1870. General George E. Maxwell was nominated for Congress. But the Mormon candidate won by a huge margin, despite the fact that Corinne cast more votes than it had inhabitants!

Despite all of Connor's efforts, Corinne appeared a jinxed town from the first. One big blow came when Brigham Young linked Salt Lake City with Idaho, with the building of the Utah and Northern Railroad. This cut out most of Corinne's freighting business from the north and northwest. The most powerful blow came when the Union Pacific decided on Ogden as the railway junction and not Corinne. Businesses by the hundreds left the jinx town. The proud steamer *City of Corinne* died when the fluctuating waters of Great Salt Lake receded and sand bars made it impossible for the boat to operate from the Bear River. It was sold at a raffle. The other boats gradually disappeared.

Corinne die-hards kept trying. They decided to challenge the Mormons in agriculture. So in 1890 the Bear Lake and River Water and Irrigation Company came into being, and water was provided for 10,000 acres of land. Crops, that first year, were abundant. But the second year carried on the jinx that hovered like a specter over the town: alkali moved to the surface and the land became a worthless marsh.

Lesser shadows fell across the town, such as the diphtheria epidemic of 1872 which brought death to hundreds of people, and caused many more to leave. Others decided it was time to pull out when in 1876, the Indians went on the warpath. The Red Men completely surrounded the town. They demanded whatever they fancied, and took it if it was not handed over. The soldiers from Fort Douglas put a stop to this. But some folks had decided you couldn't count on anything going right for Corinne!

IN ITS early years, ambitious Corinne citizens had paved the rutted, muddy streets with the crushed slag from the smelter. It provided a good bed to carry the heavy freighting wagons. Even the slag in the street wasn't safe, however. For after the passage of Corinne's heyday, a group of miners began to examine the slag closely. They bought all of it, and when refined by better methods it produced twenty dollars to the ton!

On the positive side, it can be said that the turbulent jinx city brought some good things to Utah. It fostered mining and made Utah a major ore-producing state, and Connor is still called the father of Utah mining. Corinne citizens were the first to use steamboats on the lake, and they encouraged trade with states and territories to the north and northwest. The first non-Mormon church was also built in Corinne. The experiments in agriculture can be considered in a positive way, too, even though the experiment failed. In a way Corinne was a proving ground for better relations between Mormons and Gentiles.

So faded the dreams of the jinx city. Its dreams were big, and its people did some heroic things. Today it is an agricultural hamlet. And most of its inhabitants are Mormons.

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THE MEN, almost five hundred in number, marched in six orderly companies, well armed with revolvers, shotguns and rifles. They were grim-faced and determined as they marched through the streets of Virginia City, Montana Territory, searching every store and house. Virginia City citizens had seen grim Vigilante posses in the town before, seeking out law-breakers. But this time the search was for flour!

The search ended with some eighty-odd sacks of flour turned up, which were stored in Leviathan Hall, leaving behind many disgruntled storekeepers and hoarders who only spluttered, fearful of the rage of the posse.

This strange episode took place in Virginia City in 1865, brought about the scarcity of flour in the boomtown, which zoomed the price of the commodity to over one-hundred dollars per one hundred pounds.

During the winters, Virginia City was isolated from its main source of supply, Salt Lake City, four hundred miles away. Over 10,000 people lived in the vicinity at this time, and merchants, anxious to sell all the mining equipment they could, had failed to stock sufficient supplies of foodstuff, especially flour. Too, the last freighting outfit out of Salt Lake had been snowed in in Beaver Canyon. The freighters ate the food intended for the Montana country.

Not only flour was a high-priced item during the food-shortage days. Potatoes were 65 cents a pound; sugar $1.00 a pound; tea $3.00; beans 40 cents, and butter $1.75. As these items were somewhat more plentiful, there was little hoarding of them. The *Montana Post* told a different story about flour, however.

Thus, in the March 18, 1865, issue: "Flour is on the rampage. For the present it may have touched the highest point and may possibly decline. Everyone is asking: "What's the matter with flour?" There's nothing the matter with flour. The question is with the generous holders of the staple. They think the honest, hard-working miners will run short before Spring and they very considerately, for their benefit, raised the prices to $30 a sack."

In following issues, the paper had more to report:

April 15: "Flour is in considerable demand at a considerable advance over last quotations. $48 to $50 depending on the brand."

April 16: "The flour market opened with $10 a sack advance and by 11 a.m. had reached a normal price of $65 for 98 pounds. The day closed with a further advance of $5 per sack."

April 17: "Consumers, having no other recourse, were compelled to concede to the normal price of holders and paid $90 a sack in gold."

April 18: "One dollar a pound and higher in outlying areas."

April 22: "On Tuesday last, the citizens were informed that large bodies of men, armed and organized, were marching with the avowed determination to take all flour in town and divide it among those who had none."

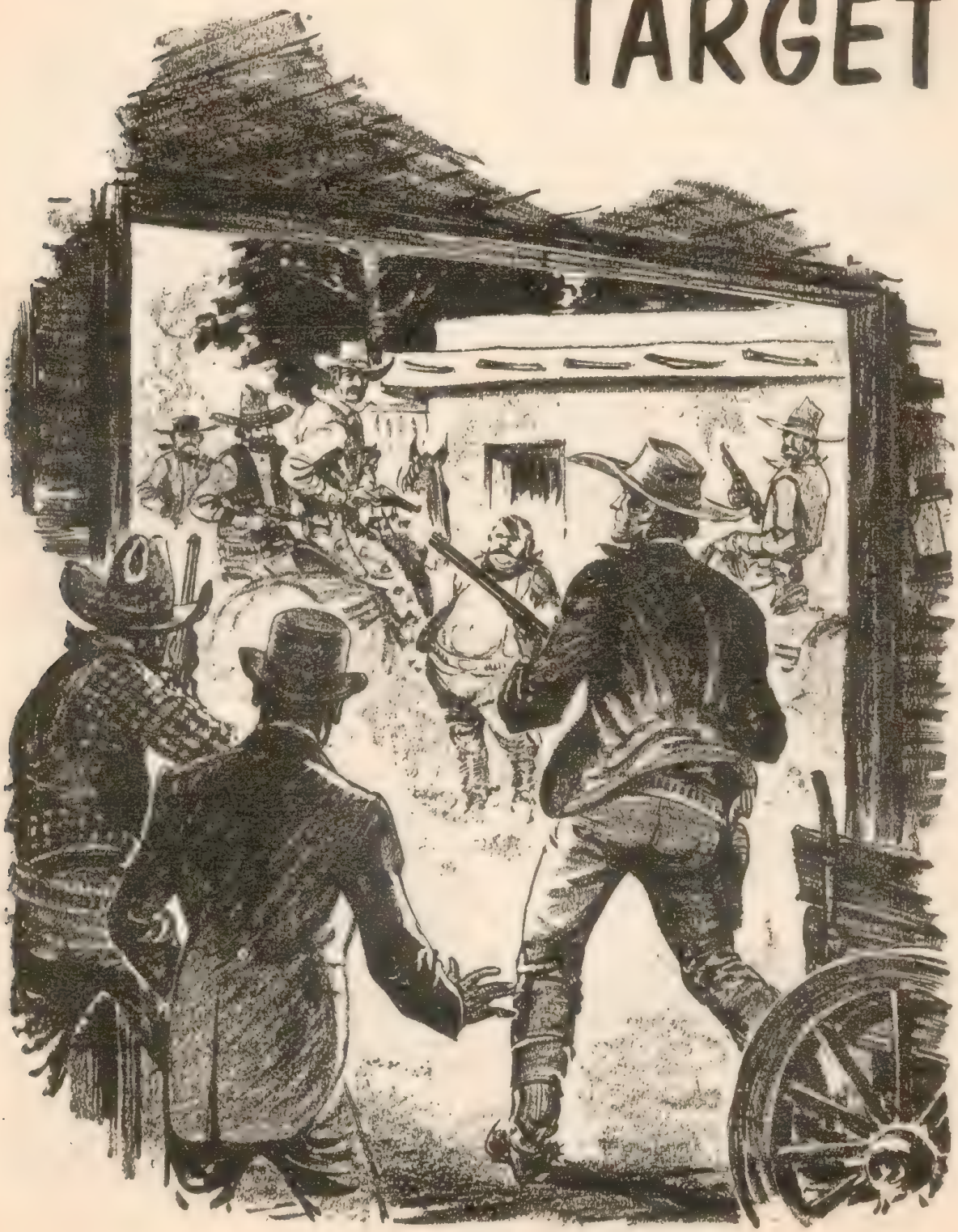
So, with a flour sack as a banner, the posse marched, finding flour hidden in haystacks, under houses, in stock feed bins, and in many other odd places. A strict account was kept of each sack taken, and the owner was promised twenty-seven to thirty dollars per sack, depending on the brand. Later, the flour, twelve pounds for each needy man, and more for families, was distributed from Leviathan Hall, with armed guards keeping order.

Once again Virginia City, noted for its Virgilantes, had proved that where there was no law in the books to take care of difficult situations, the law of the six-gun was just as effective! At any rate, the *Post* in June, 1865, stated that the price of flour was at a new low of $18 per sack!

—*Sam Brant*

A Novel by JOSEPH CHADWICK

TARGET



for the WILD BUNCH

O'Mara was tough—but he had to be hard as nails when he waged his one-man feud in a land where a cocked gun in the hand of a land-grabber was a law beyond the law!

CHAPTER I

"Be Gone by Morning!"

THERE was no arguing with a cocked gun. They caught Ed O'Mara as he stepped out of his cabin that misty dawn, five of them. He was on his way to the nearby creek to wash up, and he had yet to rid his brain of the cobwebby dullness that was a leftover from a long night's sleep. One of them said sourly, "All right, O'Mara. Just hold still."

O'Mara halted midway between cabin and creek, staring blankly until he recognized the black-bearded Kolb. Then fear came and, as always, fear brought anger. He swore, and said, "So you've got friends."

Kolb grinned through his beard. "Good friends, O'Mara," he replied. "I told you I'd be back—and here I am."

The man who had ordered O'Mara to hold still, the man with the cocked gun aimed at O'Mara's lean belly, said, "That's right. Kolb has got friends. He told you so, but you wouldn't take his word for it. So we rode all this way to show you he's no liar. We don't aim to make the trip a second time."

He was a burly man, ruddy of complexion. He looked hard, tough. He was mounted on a dun horse wearing the famed Bell brand, and O'Mara took him to be Matt Riordan himself, range boss for the Bell Ranch.

"You're the kind that can't be told," the burly man added, "so you've got to be shown."

"All right," O'Mara said. "So now I've been shown."

"Not yet, you haven't," Riordan retorted. Then: "Chris—Tip!"

Two men dropped from their mounts and circled around behind O'Mara. He showed that he didn't like that, but he kept his murky gaze on Riordan and the cocked gun. He knew that no bluff was being pulled; if he didn't hold still, the hammer would fall on Riordan's gun and a slug would tear O'Mara's heart out of him. This was the Black Range, New Mexico Territory; this was that kind of country where a cocked gun in the hand of a Bell rider was the law beyond the law.

O'Mara had on his pants and boots, but he was naked above the belt. The two dismounted men grabbed him from behind, each taking an arm. O'Mara's face turned ugly. The heavy muscles of his chest and shoulders bunched. It wasn't the two men who held him: it was the cocked gun. He was big enough and rough enough to have taken on both this Chris and Tip at the same time, and whipped them.

On Riordan's heavy face was a grimace supposed to be a grin. He said, "Now, Kolb."

KOLB got down, slowly advanced toward O'Mara. He was a short man, but thick and powerful. He kept grinning through his beard, and the gleam in his bloodshot eyes showed that he was relishing this. He halted before O'Mara, shoved his face close to O'Mara's face. "I told you, didn't I?" he said. His breath stank of rotgut whisky.

O'Mara said thinly, "Don't do it. I warn you, Kolb."

Riordan growled, "Get on with it, Kolb."

Kolb said, "Sure," and hit O'Mara just above the belt buckle with all his might.

The breath puffed out of O'Mara in a gusty yell. His knees buckled, but the men holding his arms kept him from collapsing. Kolb took a left-handed grip on O'Mara's hair and, jerking his head up and back, hit him in the face with his right fist. He used short jabs that hurt yet wouldn't bring unconsciousness. Blood trickled from O'Mara's nose and from a cut in his lower lip. His eyes lost their angry look, turned glassy.

Riordan said, "That does it," and Kolb, with one last blow, stepped back.

They let loose of O'Mara, and he pitched forward onto his face. He rolled over once, trying to rise, getting himself smeared with dirt for his trouble. He finally managed to get to his hands and knees, a man determined not to stay down. Kolb aimed a boot at his face, but checked it upon Riordan's order.

Riordan said, "I want him to hear this." His voice was harsh with authority to hold Kolb in check. "O'Mara, get this through your thick skull," he went on. "Be gone from here by tomorrow morning. If I have to come back here again, you won't ever get away. You savvy that?"

O'Mara made no reply, and Riordan, holstering his gun, insisted upon none. To Matt Riordan, brute force was the answer to everything, and he was convinced that O'Mara had been taught a sufficient lesson. He proved that by giving O'Mara a final glance that had contempt in it. He turned his horse away, saying, "Let's get out of here."

They rode out with a noisy clatter of hoofs and much creaking of saddle leather, and were lost to O'Mara's blurred sight when he heaved erect. He stood swaying, cursing them in a low, bitter voice. He wiped blood from his face, then turned to the creek to wash away as much of the beating as he could. He couldn't get at what the beating had done to him inside; not even time would wash away the corrosive hate he felt.

"Get out?" he muttered, wiping the water from his face. "All right!"

He would get out before tomorrow morning, just as they'd ordered. He was no fool. He could defy them. He could fort up, stand guard with a .30-30 rifle, and give them a hot reception when they returned. And end up dead. But he would give this hand to them, and let the game, now only started, run its course. He would play his own cards close to his chest. And so he would get out—today.

ED O'MARA

—who organized his own one-man army against killers!

He moved without haste, starting a fire and cooking his breakfast. Having eaten, he got his two horses from the pole corral, saddled the buckskin, and rigged the sorrel with a pack-saddle. He went back inside the cabin and gathered his gear together, what little there was of it, and his stock of grub. By the time the sun had chased the fog out of the last hollow, he was ready to leave.

He stood by his horses, rolled a smoke, looked about for the last time. It was a nameless little canyon, one of many throughout the Black Range. He had lived there only two months. He had built his cabin of pickets cut from the nearby patch of junipers, and had given it a roof of dirt. He had planned the place as his ranch headquarters, had filed on it, homesteaded it.

He had expected to buy a small herd, as a starter. This was a time when everybody and his brother was affected by the craze for cattle, all afire to become cattle barons. The Texans had discovered the distant ranges of the Territory. O'Mara had been a cattleman before, back in Texas. Then he had gone partners with a man who operated a stage line. Tiring of stage-coaching, he had drifted into New Mexico.

Then, before he'd got a real start, Jacob Kolb had showed up to dispute O'Mara's claim. He had arrived with a wagon and about two hundred head of scrawny longhorn cattle and a couple Mexican kids hired as *vaqueros*. Kolb had argued that the canyon location was his, that he had filed on it at Federal land office at Las Cruces. Three months before, he'd claimed. He had pulled a gun, and O'Mara had taken it from him and sent him packing. Kolb had threatened to come back with friends.

And he had come back with them.

O'MARA knew now that it had been a put-up job, that he had been jobbed. Kolb was no ordinary homesteader, but a shrewd operator in the pay of the octopus-like Bell outfit which was reaching out greedy tentacles across the entire Black Range. O'Mara knew, too, that if he went to the land office, he would find that not he but Jacob Kolb had filed on this particular location. Bell's influence touched everything, and it was not fantastic that the outfit had found a way to manipulate the land office records.

O'Mara thought, "To hell with it," and turned to mount his horse. Then a second thought took him back into the little picket house. When he came out again, smoke was beginning to roll from the doorway. He mounted the dun, caught up the sorrel's halter rope, and turned west through the canyon. He looked back after

riding for perhaps a half mile.

Smoke was rolling skyward. Flames were leaping high, brighter than the sunlight.

There was little satisfaction in it, but the Bell crowd would never make use of the cabin Ed O'Mara had so painstakingly built.

O'Mara trailed west, through fine game country. A man didn't have to eat his own beef in the Black Range. Or even another's beef. Deer were everywhere, and turkeys were close to being a nuisance. If a man wanted some sport, he could go hunting for grizzlies.

At high noon, O'Mara rode past the abandoned buildings of Jess Wheeler's ranch. Old Jess had got out a month ago. He'd sold out to Bell. Scared out, O'Mara knew.

Bell cattle were scattered thinly across the grass that Wheeler had let Bell acquire for a song. O'Mara eyed them with a scowl. He crossed this range, coming finally to the barbed wire drift fence that Red Larsen had thrown up with the wishful thought that barbwire could halt Bell's expansion in his direction. There was a gate in the fence, rigged with pulleys and weights. O'Mara passed through and looked back to make sure the gate swung closed after him. He began to pass small bunches of Larsen's cattle, and finally sighted the headquarters.

Red Larsen had built solidly. His house and barn and sheds were of heavy logs on stone foundations. He had built in the manner of a man whose ancestors had lived in cold climes. He had built like a man who expected to stay put for a long time, and the truth was that Bell, for some reason, was a long time in putting pressure on him.

That was all the stranger, considering that Red Larsen was a man seldom seen sober.

O'Mara saw nothing of Larsen when he rode into the ranchyard, but Red's daughter Conchita appeared at the doorway of the house and watched him with all the interest of a girl who sees too few men. O'Mara touched his hat to her, and in another mood he might have been warmed by her smile.

Conchita Larsen had her father's pale blue eyes, but the rest of her was Mexican as her mother had been. She possessed a dark, lively beauty. A feline sort of beauty. She looked desirable—and dangerous. As she smiled, Conchita smoothed her calico dress down over her hips and lifted her chest so that her breasts strained against the bodice of the dress. Her smile was a flirt's smile.

O'Mara said, "How are you, Conchita?" and rode on toward the barn where Frank Hockaday was shoeing a horse.

Frank dropped the horse's hoof, tossed the file he had been using into his toolbox. He wiped sweat from his face with his shirt sleeve. He was a lean, half handsome man of about twenty-eight or -nine. With Red Larsen a drunk, it was Frank Hockaday who held the Larsen ranch together. That was almost as strange as Bell's reluctance to bother Larsen, for Frank Hockaday, whom O'Mara knew well from their Texas days, was an odd customer to hold anything together.

He was a tophand, Frank was, a good bronc buster, and he had more cattle savvy than most ranch owners. But he wasn't steady. O'Mara had known him since they were kids, down around San Antonio, and Frank Hockaday held down a job only long enough to come by enough money to have himself a time. "Got to have me a little sport," he would always alibi himself when he quit a job.

His idea of sport was a bit weird. O'Mara had once gone hunting for him and located him in a Chinese opium dive across the Rio Grande in Nuevo Laredo. Another time Frank had gone to roost for a month in a parlor house in El Paso. That had been after he'd made some big money smuggling across the Border. The smuggling hadn't been work for Frank, O'Mara knew; it had "sport."

So it was odd that Frank Hockaday stayed on with Red Larsen. Unless Conchita kept him there.

That, O'Mara reflected, might be the explanation.

HOCKADAY'S shrewd eyes took in O'Mara's pack-horse. They were odd eyes, as chill as knife-steel and almost colorless; they were secretive eyes, yet the man did possess a quick and friendly smile. He didn't smile now, however, but said gravely, "Looks like you're going places, Ed."

O'Mara nodded. He pushed his hat back off his forehead, hooked his right leg about his saddle-horn, took out makings. Frank took in the fist marks on his face.

"Bell?"

"Yeah. And a man named Jacob Kolb."

"He's Bell, too."

"Yeah," said O'Mara, rolling his smoke. "I found that out for myself. Like you warned me, the Bell crowd plays rough."

He saw Frank frown. If Frank Hockaday considered any man his friend, which was doubtful, that man was Ed O'Mara. O'Mara had got him out of scrapes with the law, had grubstaked him when he was broke, had once nursed him through a severe case of smallpox.

O'Mara lighted his cigarette, and said, "How does Larsen manage to hold out against them, Frank? That's something a man should know."

Frank's smile showed. He nodded toward the ranchhouse. "Red's got what you haven't—a fine-looking daughter."

"So?"

"So the big boss at Bell rides by to see Conchita some nights."

"Hal Creighton?"

Frank nodded. "Himself."

O'Mara said, "I can't see you letting anybody beat your time with a filly like that."

"Don't worry about me, *amigo*," Frank Hockaday said, his smile stretching into a grin. "Creighton doesn't show up often enough to suit the girl. Listen, Ed—take some advice from a friend. Forget what happened. Get out of the Black Range. Make tracks. Don't try to even any scores."

"Frank, one held a gun on me and two others held my arms while Kolb worked me over. I can't forget that. You know me better than that."

"Yeah, I guess I do," Frank Hockaday said, looking worried. "Well, if you've got to pay back that crowd, do it the smart way. Get some friends on your side. Some of the other two-bit ranchers are talking about organizing so they can stand up to the Bell outfit. You can probably get in touch with them in San Marcos."

"It's an idea. Thanks."

"I'd still rather see you clear off this range."

"Sure, Frank," O'Mara said. He tossed his cigarette away, straightened in the saddle. "I'll see you around."

He turned his horses away.

Frank Hockaday called after him. "Yeah. If you stay alive."

CHAPTER II

Tonight—at Midnight

SAN MARCOS had become a town by accident. In the beginning, a Mexican had located a sheep camp on the site. Then a peddler looking for customers had arrived at the sheep camp where his wagon broke down. An enterprising man, the peddler had used the boards and canvas of his wagon to build a tiny store.

The people of the ranches then being founded had become his customers. The peddler had become a merchant. He had more merchandise freighted in, and built an addition to his place of business. He had passed word on to a friend, and the friend had come to start a saloon.

From that small beginning, a town had come into being and grown as the Black Range expanded into cattle country. It was a raw-looking town of unpainted plank and crude adobe.

O'Mara rode in at sundown, putting his horses up at Kyle's Livery Stable and storing his gear in the harness room there. He walked to the center of town, and noticed the Bell brand on the single horse standing at the hitchrack of Sam Lyle's Alamo Saloon. Sight of the bell-shaped

iron angered him anew, and he turned into the Alamo with a chip on his shoulder.

There was but one customer in the saloon, a gaunt old man with a shaggy gray mustache, a man whom O'Mara knew from Texas—Ben Hackett. He was nursing a drink and talking to bald little Sam Lyle. The two looked around at O'Mara, but upon seeing the stiff look of anger on his face they gave him no greeting.

"Who belongs to that Bell horse outside?" O'Mara demanded.

"I rode it in," Hackett said. "Why, Ed?"

O'Mara looked surprised. "You riding for that outfit, Ben?"

"Not exactly. I'm blacksmith out at the Bell."

"Oh. All right, Ben."

Sam Lyle reached for a bottle and a glass, poured a drink for O'Mara, and said, "Something sticking in your craw, Ed?"

"Yeah, something is," O'Mara said sourly. He reached for the drink, downed it, choked a little on the rotgut whisky. "Fill it up again, Sam. Ben's too. You have one with us. Yeah, something's sticking in my craw. The Bell has put me on its black list. I was hoping I'd find Matt Riordan or Hal Creighton here, when I saw that bronc outside."

Lyle said, "Those two hombres don't come here, Ed. I put out no welcome mat for them. Well, it's too bad. But it's no more than I and everybody else expected. You picked the wrong spot to homestead."

"What would the right spot be, Sam?"

The saloonman shrugged.

They drank, then Ben Hackett, looking uncomfortable, said, "Ed, at my age a job is a job. I can't be choosy. But don't get the idea that I do more for the Bell than blacksmithing. I know most of the two-bit ranchers around these parts, those from Texas. Some of them are friends of mine. If I was told to take a gun and ride with the crew against any of the little ranchers, I'd ask for my time."

He bought the second round of drinks.

They talked about it, about all the little ranchers who had been squeezed out by the Bell during the past six months. Ben Hackett was as disapproving as any right-minded man should have been, even though he was on the Bell's payroll. He claimed that a man couldn't be loyal to such an outfit, if he had a decent streak in him. Sam Lyle was down on the Bell because the exodus of little ranchers from the Black Range was hurting business for himself and the whole of San Marcos.

The third round was on the house.

They talked some more, O'Mara saying, "I hear that some of the two-bit cattlemen are talking of organizing so they can stop the Bell."

"Who told you about that?" Sam Lyle asked. "It's supposed to be a secret."

"Frank Hockaday."

"Oh? How'd he find out about it?"

O'Mara shrugged. "From his boss, Red Larsen, I guess."

Sam Lyle looked puzzled. "That's queer," he said. "Larsen wasn't asked to the meeting that's to be held. On account of some folks suspecting him of being in with the Bell crowd. Well, that sort of thing can't be kept a secret. The Bell bunch most likely knows all about it." He looked questioningly at Ben Hackett.

THE old man shook his head. "Nobody tells me anything at the Bell," he said. "And it's not often I get to town. I came in to take the buckboard back to the ranch. John Belden is driving it in to town, sometime this evening. He and his wife are taking the stage out tomorrow morning. They'll put up at the hotel here tonight."

"Who's John Belden?" O'Mara asked. "I never heard of him."

"An Easterner," Sam Lyle said. "He's head of the company that owns the Bell. In fact, the Bell Ranch was named for him. Bell—Belden. He's been visiting out there for the past couple of weeks."

O'Mara said, "So?" He looked thoughtful.

Ben Hackett said that he was hungry and would go for supper. Once he was gone, Sam Lyle said, "I didn't want to say it in front of old Ben, but the meeting will be here tomorrow night. I guess

you rate being present, Ed."

He went to the far end of the bar and picked up the newspaper lying there. Returning to O'Mara, he laid the paper on the bar and pointed to a story on the front page. The newspaper was the *Albuquerque Journal*. The article read:

EASTERN FINANCIER A VISITOR

John Belden, prominent Philadelphia banker and president of the Belden Cattle Company, arrived here yesterday on his way to the Bell Ranch in the southwestern part of the Territory. Mr. Belden informed the *Journal* that he and the other officials of his company are well pleased with their ranching enterprise in the wild Black Range country. He states that in the two years since its modest beginning, the Bell Ranch has grown to be the largest cattle outfit in that part of the country. Fifty thousand head of stock now carry the Bell brand, according to Mr. Belden, and in consolidating the company's vast holdings about two hundred individual ranchmen have been bought out by the Belden Cattle Company.

Mr. Belden sees New Mexican Territory as a great stock range during the next decade, and is making plans accordingly. He hopes to increase the Bell Ranch holdings and aims at herds tallying a hundred thousand head. The *Journal* applauds the gentleman's ambitious plans, and hopes that more men of such vision and capital invest on so large a scale in New Mexico's future.

Mr. Belden is accompanied by his wife who was, we are informed, a famous actress before her marriage and known to theater-goers as Miss Claire Logan. It is rarely that so lovely and gracious a lady as Mrs. Belden has visited our fair city.

There was a gun in her hand. "Get out," she said fiercely

O'Mara pushed the paper from him, looked at Sam Lyle with a frown. "Bell bought out about two hundred individual ranchmen," he said bitterly. "Well, that's a polite way of putting it."

"It just goes to show that you can't believe all you read."

"And Belden is due in San Marcos this evening?"

"So old Ben said. But what of it?"

"I think I'll have a little talk with the gentleman," O'Mara said.

There was a clatter of hoofs and a creaking of wheels from the street, and O'Mara crossed to the door. Sam Lyle followed him. A buckboard drawn by a pair of matched grays was rolling smartly along the dusty street. The rig was freshly painted, its wheels a gleaming yellow and the rest of it a shiny black.

The man handling the reins appeared to be in his middle fifties. He was of medium stature, on the lean side. He was dressed like a city man, was expensively tailored. He was gray at the temples, distinguished-looking.

"Belden?" O'Mara asked.

"Yeah," Sam Lyle said.

The buckboard was passing the Alamo now, and O'Mara looked at Belden's wife. He stared, with surprise. He'd had no preconceived notions about Mrs. Belden, but anyway she was not what he expected. She was young and beautiful, only half her husband's age, O'Mara guessed, and breathtakingly lovely. Her eyes met O'Mara's, and they widened under the intensity of his gaze, then quickly looked away. The rig was past then, pulling up in front of the San Marcos Hotel.

Sam Lyle chuckled, and said, "And Mrs. Belden. A looker, eh?"

BECAUSE of the woman, because of what she was like, O'Mara changed his mind about having a talk with John Belden. Then he decided that it was senseless to let her interfere with what he wanted to do. A half-hour after the couple had gone into the hotel, the proprietor welcoming them and taking their luggage from the buckboard, O'Mara left the Alamo and crossed the street.

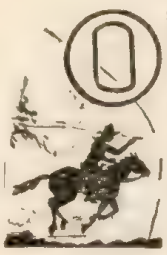
When he reached the hotel, Ben Hackett was tying his horse to the rear of the buckboard. He looked around, saw O'Mara, and said, "Ed," in a furtive whisper. O'Mara walked over to the buckboard, and the old man said, as he climbed to the seat, "Juan Redondo is to go next. They've got him marked for tonight—midnight."

Hackett quickly untied the reins from the whip socket and slapped at the team. The grays started out at a trot, Hackett swinging them around neatly and driving north along the street.

O'Mara stared after him, pondering the man's furtive message and knowing clearly enough what it meant. Juan Redondo was another little rancher, and the Bell was planning to squeeze him out—tonight, at midnight. It must have taken Ben Hackett quite some time to make up his mind to pass the information on to someone who could warn Redondo. No matter how soured a man became on his outfit, it was hard for him to be disloyal.

CHAPTER III

No Arguing With a Gun



O'MARA thought about Hackett's information for a moment, and decided that, since Redondo's ranch was only about seven miles west of San Marcos, there was plenty of time to get out there and warn him. He turned into the hotel. There was no one at the desk, but he could hear the rumbling voice of fat Jess Kling, the owner, back in the dining room. He crossed the lobby and looked at the register, noting the room number entered beside John Belden's boldly executed signature.

He went upstairs, knocked on the door of the room, and the woman's voice said, "Come in."

He entered and found her alone, and became so embarrassed he stood just inside the doorway not knowing what to do. She was seated at a table against the wall,

brushing her hair. She had removed her dress, and he could see the creamy whiteness of her bare shoulders where the soft mass of her burnished hair did not quite reach.

"John," she said impatiently, "do close the door."

She turned at the same moment, frowning. Then she gave a startled little cry and hastily rose to catch up a robe from the bed. She donned the robe, belted it, faced O'Mara with a trace of color staining her cheeks. She said awkwardly, "My husband stepped out to mail a letter. I—I thought he was returning."

O'Mara had never felt so foolish in his life, and he stammered, "I—I'm sorry. I shouldn't have busted in that way." He removed his hat. "I'll came back later, Mrs. Belden, to see your husband."

"Is it important?" she asked. "I ask that because—well, Mr. Belden isn't feeling well and I'd rather he would forget business for a little while."

"It's important," O'Mara said, "to me."

She said, "Oh," in a curious tone, seeming disturbed by the sudden harshness in his voice. "Well, I'll tell him to expect you, Mr.—"

"O'Mara. Ed O'Mara is my name."

She nodded and regarded him with interest, and O'Mara told himself that she was indeed a beautiful woman. She said, "I'll remember your name. I think I've heard it before, Mr. O'Mara. But I can't remember under what circumstances."

"I'm the man those Bell riders jumped this morning," he told her. "You can see the marks of the beating on my face."

She looked at his face, at the cuts and bruises, her eyes widening. Her eyes were amber, and fringed by long lashes. "You mean," she said thickly, "that you were in a fight with some of the Bell employes?"

"With five of them."

"I—I don't understand."

"Maybe your husband will explain to you," O'Mara said, turning to leave the room. He looked at her. "It might interest you. Ask him."

He saw quick anger mirrored in her eyes. "Very well," she said coldly. "I will ask him. Please close the door after you, Mr. O'Mara."

O'Mara closed the door after him.

He couldn't quite figure it out, but his encounter with Mrs. Belden had left him feeling shaken. He supposed it was because he wasn't used to seeing a woman under such intimate circumstances. In fact, he had never before looked upon such feminine loveliness as Claire Belden's.

The post office was in Hiram Macklin's general store, but John Belden had already left there when O'Mara looked into the store. Turning away, O'Mara supposed that Belden had gone for a drink after mailing his letter. There were two saloons besides the Alamo, but O'Mara found his man in neither of them.

He returned to the Alamo, and found Frank Hockaday tying his horse at the hitch-rack. A smile curled Frank's lips, and he said, "I rode in to keep you out of trouble, pardner." The smile wasn't mirrored in his pale eyes. They remained chill, oddly blank.

"You know John Belden, Frank?"

"I've seen him around. Why?"

"He's in town, and I want to talk to him. You see him, riding in?"

Frank shook his head. "What'll it get you, Ed?" he asked.

O'Mara shrugged. "I don't know."

They went inside, and Sam Lyle, still lacking customers, was sitting at a table playing solitaire. He gave O'Mara an inquiring look, and said, "Didn't see him, eh? He's over at the stage company office. I saw him go in a few minutes ago. Ed, I don't think it'll pay off. You can talk to a man like that until you're blue in the face, and it'll get you nowhere."

O'MARA said, "You're probably right," and sat down at the table. He took out makings, was thoughtful while rolling and lighting his cigarette. He couldn't get the picture of Belden's wife out of his mind, and that made him feel guilty as hell. He wasn't the kind of a man, he told himself, to let another man's woman become important to him. He said,

"You two know Juan Redondo?"

Sam Lyle said, "Sure," and Frank Hockaday nodded.

"What kind of a man is he?"

"One of the best," the saloonman said. "He used to run sheep. The other ranchers objected. Juan sold his woolies, bought cattle. He tries to get along with everybody. He's got a wife and a couple of kids. I never heard a word against him. Why, Ed?"

"Bell is going after him tonight."

"No!" Sam Lyle exclaimed, and swore under his breath.

Frank Hockaday said sharply, "How do you know that, Ed?"

O'Mara looked at him, shook his head. "I'm not telling that," he said. He saw the tight, anxious look on his friend's thin face.

Frank said, "Juan should be told. I've a notion to ride out there and warn him." He waited for O'Mara to agree.

"I was going to do it," O'Mara said. "But go ahead, if you want to. Yeah, go ahead. I'll come out later, after I've seen Belden. With us siding him, Juan can tell that bunch off."

Frank Hockaday stood there thinking about it for a moment, then nodded and left the saloon. A moment later there was a beat of hoofs as he rode away.

Sam Lyle said uneasily, "That Hockaday—he gives me the creeps sometimes. Those eyes of his—" He watched O'Mara rise. "Going for that talk with Belden now?"

O'Mara said that he was going to get some supper, that he'd just remembered that he hadn't eaten since early morning. "I've been so damn sore all day I forgot to be hungry," he told the saloonman. "I'll see Belden after I've eaten. I've changed my mind about him. I'm not going to just talk turkey to him. I'm going to take him on a little ride."

"A ride? To where?"

"To Juan Redondo's ranch," O'Mara said.

He walked out of the saloon, leaving Sam Lyle with a shocked look on his face.

It was full dark when O'Mara climbed the rickety stairs to the second floor of the San Marcos Hotel. He had eaten supper in the hotel dining-room, then gone to Kyle's livery, where he had saddled his own dun horse and hired another mount. The animals were now tied at the hotel's hitchrack. A bracket lamp cast a gloomy light along the upstairs hallway. O'Mara knocked on the door of the Beldens' room, and John Belden opened the door.

"Mr. O'Mara?"

"That's right."

"I'm John Belden. Mrs. Belden told me that you had called and would be back." His color was not good; it was gray with pallor. His eyes looked tired. "I suggest that we go down to the lobby to discuss what's bothering you. The rooms of this alleged hotel" —he smiled faintly— "are a bit cramped. I'll get my coat."

"Get your hat, too," O'Mara ordered. "We'll be going farther than the lobby."

Belden gave him a sharp, searching look. "Just what do you mean, O'Mara?"

"I have a horse outside for you," O'Mara replied. "I'm taking you on a little trip. Not too long a one. You'll be back here in time to catch the stage in the morning."

Belden frowned, "Now, see here—"

O'Mara cut in, "Get your hat and coat, Belden."

It was doubtful if John Belden had been talked to in such a harsh tone in all his adult life. He stared at O'Mara in astonishment, then with anger. But the rocky look on O'Mara's face checked whatever protest he wanted to make. He said slowly, "I see. If I don't come willingly, you'll take me by force. Is that it, O'Mara?"

"That's it, Belden."

THE man nodded, turned back into the room. O'Mara stepped into the doorway, pushing the door wide open. He expected Belden to get a gun. Mrs. Belden was on the bed, reading a novel. She was wearing the robe she had donned during O'Mara's earlier visit, a handsome garment of dark green. She was posed prettily on her side, with her head propped on one hand. She turned a page, then looked around and saw O'Mara. Her

amber eyes widened. She sat up hurriedly.

O'Mara said, "I apologize for this second intrusion, Mrs. Belden. But I want to be sure that your husband gets his hat and coat—and nothing more."

Belden was pulling on his gray suit coat. He smiled in that miserly fashion of his, and said, "Don't worry, O'Mara. I'm not so foolhardy as to threaten with a gun a man of your obvious determination." He picked up his hat, turned to his wife. "Claire, I'll be gone most of the night. Mr. O'Mara insists that I go off on some sort of trip with him."

She rose, an affrighted look in her eyes. "John, no!"

O'Mara said, "Don't worry, Mrs. Belden. I'll have him back before stage time."

She stared at him for a moment, then whirled to a traveling bag open on a chair. She took something from among the clothes in the bag, and swung around toward O'Mara again. She no longer looked so ladylike. The genteel pose was gone, and so was the frightened look. Her red-brown hair seemed suddenly flamelike, and her eyes were bright with a wild excitement. There was a gun in her hand, a small silver-plated revolver.

It was aimed at O'Mara, and it was cocked.

"Get out!" she said fiercely. "Get out of here!"

And, as Ed O'Mara well knew, there was no arguing with a cocked gun.

He gazed at her with an admiration that had nothing to do with her physical perfection. It was her loyalty to her husband that he had to admire, at the same instant that fear washed through him. He had a right to know fear, for it occurred to him that his life was in far more danger now than it had been that morning when Matt Riordan had held a gun on him. A woman was always unpredictable, and this woman in sudden fury might decide to squeeze the trigger at any instant.

He nodded jerkily, said thickly, "All right, Mrs. Belden."

He turned to go, but halted when Belden said, "One moment, O'Mara." And to his wife, "Put it away, Claire. I don't think we're going to have any trouble with our friend now." Belden took a cigar from his vest pocket, clipped off the end with a small gold pocketknife attached to his watch chain. He eyed O'Mara narrowly. "I think you'd better explain."

The woman eased the revolver off cock, but she didn't lay it aside.

O'Mara said, "I homesteaded a claim in a canyon east of here. This morning a bunch of Bell riders showed up with a man named Kolb who argued that he'd filed on that location. Matt Riordan held a gun on me. Two of his men then held me while Kolb worked me over. I was told that they would kill me if I didn't clear out before tomorrow morning. So I cleared out. But I'm not letting the matter rest."

"I see," said Belden, after lighting his cigar. "You have a quarrel with the Bell Ranch—and me—because the Bell riders took sides with this man Kolb."

"Kolb is a Bell man."

"No. The name isn't on the pay-roll."

"Still, he's a Bell man," O'Mara said. "He's getting his pay from the Bell, even if his name isn't written down. He didn't want my homestead claim for himself. The Bell crowd wanted it. And maybe you know about it."

"No. I do not know about it."

"So you say."

"My word has always been good, O'Mara."

O'MARA said flatly, "Back East maybe, but not here. Your Bell outfit has a bad reputation. What I lost because of the Bell wasn't much. What some other ranchers lost was a lot more. You don't need to take my word for it. Go down into the street and ask the first man you meet what he thinks of the Bell, what he knows about the Bell. Stay over until tomorrow night, and I'll take you to a meeting of a group of little ranchers who are desperate enough to organize to fight the Bell." He paused, realizing that he was letting himself be carried away by wild feelings. Then, more calmly, "Or come with me to-

night and see how the Bell crowd gets rid of a rancher when somebody—you or Hal Creighton or Matt Riordan—decides the Bell needs his range."

Belden puffed on his cigar, frowning, his eyes resentful. "I think you have this all wrong," he said finally. "I think you're exaggerating a trifling matter. The Bell Ranch has bought out many small ranchers, through Hal Creighton. But they were willing to sell."

"You ever hear the name Juan Redondo?"

"No. Is it important?"

"He's due to get the same treatment I got, at midnight," O'Mara said. "And midnight, Mr. Belden"—his voice was edged with sarcasm— "is a damn queer time for a man to sell out his ranch."

Belden thought about it for a moment, then said, "All right, O'Mara. I'll go with you."

His wife cried, "John, no!"

He turned to her.

O'Mara said, "I'll wait for you outside."

CHAPTER IV

Surprised Raiders

DOWNSTAIRS, O'Mara crossed the lobby, went out to the horses. He took out makings and built a smoke. There were horses at the racks of each of the town's three saloons. Those in front of the Territorial would probably be Bell broncs. The Bell hands frequented the Territorial. He reflected that there would be hell to pay if some of the Bell hands sighted him riding out of town with John Belden.

Then he wondered if Belden would really come with him. His wife would plead with him, and a woman like that—O'Mara smiled thinly. He guessed that if he had a woman like Claire Belden for his wife, he would think a long time before he went prowling at night.

Belden came from the hotel. "All right, O'Mara," he said.

They mounted and rode from town, taking the west road. They traveled at an easy lope. Belden riding slightly behind O'Mara. There was a half-moon, high and bright. After perhaps three miles, the road turned south and a trail continued west toward the Redondo ranch. In another half-hour, they broke from some low timbered hills and saw pin-points of light jewel-bright in the distance. The lights grew larger, took shape, became the lamplighted windows of Juan Redondo's ranchhouse.

They slowed their horses to a walk, and shortly a voice called out, "Take it easy! Name yourselves!" Frank Hockaday's voice.

O'Mara called back; "Ed, Frank. John Belden's with me."

"What?"

Hockaday stepped from the shadows of the barn, a rifle in the crook of his arm. He stared at Belden, his face full of wonder. Juan Redondo came from over by the house. He, too, was carrying a rifle. His teeth gleamed in his dusky face as he smiled a greeting. He was a short, stocky man with a *bandido* mustache. He wore a steeple-crowned sombrero.

"Senores, I am honored that you come," Redondo said. "I have been afraid for a long time, but now that I know I have friends—"

"Frank's told you that the Bell is coming tonight?"

"*Si.* And he said that you would come, too."

O'Mara dismounted. He jerked a thumb at Belden. "This is John Belden, head man of the Bell," he said. "With him here, we should be able to have a showdown with the Bell crowd, without any trouble."

Belden swung down. It had been a short ride for O'Mara, but Belden's knees buckled a little from the time in the saddle. He was breathing in labored fashion, and O'Mara suddenly knew that Mrs. Belden had spoken the truth when she said that her husband wasn't feeling well.

Belden said, "Tell me, Redondo—what is your trouble with the Bell Ranch?"

"That outfit wants my range," Redondo

said simply. "You did not know?"

"I didn't know. Has Hal Creighton offered to buy you out?"

"*Si.* For one thousand dollars."

Belden grunted with surprise. "That's ridiculous. You must have misunderstood him. Certainly he offered you more than that, if you control any sizable range."

Redondo smiled again. "I have range enough for my herd of four thousand head of cattle, senor. It is worth far more than a thousand dollars—to me. There are my buildings. But the important thing, senor, is that I do not want to sell. I told Senor Creighton that. Where would I go? If I give up my land, how will I making a living for my family?" He waited for Belden to speak, but the other man remained silent. Redondo continued, "Then Senor Riordan came, with two other hombres. He is a tough one, that Riordan. He said, 'The Bell is losing cattle. Mex, I think you are a cow thief. You better get back where you belong, across the Border—pronto.' I told him he was mistaken. I am no thief, senores. And I belong nowhere but here. I was born here, as was my father before me. Mexico is a foreign place to me."

Belden said, "I don't know what to make of this."

"These are troubled times, senor."

"You are saying that the people at the Bell Ranch are scoundrels."

"Senor, I am saying only that I want to be left alone."

Belden shook his head, as though this were a problem that he could not cope with. He took out a cigar, lighted it. Frank Hockaday moved about restlessly. Juan Redondo stood there faintly smiling, a proud, yet humble man who was grateful that he had friends to side him and yet felt that he was not, because of his Mexican heritage, one of them.

Here on his own land, at his own headquarters, he made no suggestions as to how to meet the trouble that was brewing. He would wait to see what his visitors said and did, and however they acted it would be all right with him.

[*Turn page*]

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"HE'S GOT LADDIE BOY in check all right, but not Dry Scalp. My, what unkempt hair! Looks like a mane . . . and I'll bet it's as hard to comb. Loose dandruff, too. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"

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O'Mara said, "Juan, are your wife and children abed?"

"My children, Senor O'Mara. But not my wife."

"I was thinking it would be better to darken the house."

"*Si.* I will tell Maria."

HE WENT toward the adobe house, hurrying.

Belden said, "I don't know, O'Mara. If Riordan accused him of stealing Bell stock, he must have had some evidence. I don't see that I can take this man's word against Riordan's. After all, he's a Mexican, a foreigner."

O'Mara swore, and said, "My old man was an Irisher. He talked the same lingo as the rest of us, but a lot of people couldn't savvy much of what he said. He was a funny little guy. But does that make me, an Irishman, a foreigner? As for you, maybe your ancestors came over in the Mayflower but that, if it's true, doesn't make you more of an American than Redondo—or any more honest. He says he's not a thief, and in my book that makes Matt Riordan a liar."

Frank Hockaday said, "Ed, you think I should ride out and see if the Bell crowd is coming—and how?"

"No, I guess not," O'Mara told him. "They'll ride in or they'll Injun up to the place. Either way, we'll be ready for them." Redondo came back from the now darkened house. And O'Mara went on, "Juan can talk to them from the doorway of his house. The rest of us will wait in the doorway of the barn, which will put us behind them. We'll put our horses inside the barn, so they won't know we're here the second they ride in."

Hockaday said, "All right," but there was some sort of disapproval in his voice.

John Belden said nothing at all. . . .

After what seemed a long while as they stood in the barn, O'Mara said, "It must be close to midnight." The waiting was making him edgy. Belden took out his watch, struck a match, said, "It's ten minutes to midnight." Frank Hockaday was hunkered down, his back to a small stack of bagged grain, and he said, "They're coming."

O'Mara listened intently, but a couple of minutes passed before he heard the rhythmic drumming of hoofs in the distance. He said, "Frank, you've got good ears." He dropped his cigarette, ground it under his boot heel. He picked up his Winchester and moved outside the barn doorway and whistled in signal. From the house Juan Redondo called softly, "*Si*, I hear."

The beat of hoofs grew louder and then, suddenly, riders were streaming into the ranchyard. A dozen of them, shadowy figures in the darkness. A voice bellowed, "Redondo! Come out here, Mex!" It was the arrogant voice of burly Matt Riordan.

The riders halted facing the squat adobe house, in a line abreast. Some of the horses were restless and kept acting up, but the men were quieter than so many men of their kind usually were. Like thieves in the night, Ed O'Mara thought, their guilt kept them silent. All except Matt Riordan, who feared nothing.

Riordan shouted, "Redondo! Come out here, or we'll come in and get you!"

The door opened, and Juan Redondo stepped forth.

"*Quien es?*" he said. "What do you want with me?"

Riordan was in the center of the line, a bulky shape on a big horse. "You know why we're here, hombre," he said savagely, like a man in a temper. "We warned you we'd be back if you kept on stealing Bell cattle. Well, you wouldn't heed a warning and so we're back. Damn you, Redondo, we're not going to fool around with you!"

"I stole no cattle."

"Why, you bald-faced liar, we found twenty head of our cattle hidden away on your range, with the Bell brand worked over into your spidery Mex R brand! You claim you stole no cattle, in the face of such evidence?"

"If the cattle are there, Bell riders put them there," Redondo said. "Is the sheriff with you, senor? Does he have a warrant for me?"

Riordan cursed him. "The county seat is sixty miles from here, and we're not asking the sheriff to travel all that way to do a job we can do ourselves," he said, still making a great show of anger. He called, "Chris, you got a hangman's noose tied in your rope, like I told you?"

Belden caught hold of Ed O'Mara's arm. "They're going to hang him!" he said in a hoarse whisper. He was badly shocked.

O'Mara grinned mirthlessly, shook off Belden's hand, lifted his Winchester to hip level, and called out, "That's enough, Riordan! That's more than enough!" The sound of anger in his voice was not pretense. He was mad to the core of him.

DESPITE the odds against him, O'Mara was crazy-mad enough to have welcomed a gunfight. He would have downed Matt Riordan with his first shot. But Riordan was no reckless fool. The Bell ranch boss was too shrewd at this sort of game to attempt to shoot his way out of a gun-trap when there was another way out.

He wheeled his horse about with a rough hand on the reins, and, seeing O'Mara now but not recognizing him in the darkness, he growled, "Who are you, hombre?"

"O'Mara. Remember me, Riordan?"

"So you've thrown in with a damn' rustler!"

"I'm not alone," O'Mara said. "So go ahead—cut loose your wolf!"

Riordan held his empty right hand shoulder high, and said edgily, "Take it easy, boys." His riders were milling about, most of them turning their mounts about to face the barn. "Let go of your guns," Riordan told them.

"Who's with you, O'Mara?"

"Frank Hockaday, for one."

"A saddle-tramp. You'll have to do better than that, O'Mara."

"All right," O'Mara said. "How will John Belden do?"

Riordan gave a grunt of surprise, then said, as though not trusting his own ears, "What's that? You've got Belden with you?"

O'Mara stood in the center of the barn doorway, and Frank Hockaday was at the side of it so that he had some cover in case shooting should start. But John Belden stepped from the barn, and walked slowly toward Riordan and the bunch of restless Bell riders.

"That's right, Matt," Belden said, his voice pitched low and yet carrying to every man in the ranchyard. "I don't like this. You're being too high-handed, Matt. I'm not saying you're not right about Redondo's being a cattle thief, but I am saying that you'd be guilty of a far greater crime if you hanged him. Who gave you orders to come here tonight—Hal Creighton?"

"Creighton knows about it."

"But it was your own idea?"

"I'm responsible for Bell range and for the stock on it," Riordan said, but he was arguing without his heart being in it. Belden's presence had given him a hard jolt. "And so far as I know, there's never been a better cure found for rustling than a hangrope."

"Maybe I can find a better cure," Belden replied. "I'll discuss it with you and Creighton tomorrow. Tell Creighton that I'm returning to the Bell Ranch. Now clear out of here, the lot of you, and leave this man alone."

Riordan started to say more, but choked it off and, with a muttered oath, wheeled away and struck out toward the Bell Ranch headquarters. His riders followed, and shortly the noise of their departure faded in the distance. Belden stood there, lighting a fresh cigar. His face was tired, almost haggard, in the glow of the match. O'Mara walked over to him, and Frank Hockaday followed him.

Redondo came from the house, murmuring, *"Gracias—muchisimas gracias!"*

Belden's match went out. He smoked in silence.

O'Mara said, "Juan, you can sleep sound—tonight, at least." He turned to John Belden, and told him, "All right. Let's head back to town."

Frank Hockaday rode with them. They were silent most of the way. Once, not

long after leaving the Redondo ranch, Belden had a fit of coughing and said apologetically, after throwing his cigar away, "My doctor is right. I should give up smoking."

Nothing more was said until, much later, they saw the few lights of San Marcos. Then Frank Hockaday said, "Nothing's settled. You can gamble on that."

Belden didn't comment on that, nor did O'Mara.

CHAPTER V

Challenge to Power

RIDING into town, O'Mara and his companions reined in before the hotel. Belden dismounted and gave the reins of his horse to O'Mara. He looked tired, and worried.

"I'll look farther into this business," he said. "I won't leave for the East until I get to the bottom of it. Good night, gentlemen."

O'Mara said, "Good night," but Frank Hockaday merely grunted.

They rode on to the livery stable, where Hockaday said, "Reckon I'll keep moving along. It'll be almost sunup before I get home." He hesitated a moment, then added, "Ed, don't count on that dude too much."

"You figure that he knew what was going to happen at Redondo's place?"

"No. I'm pretty sure he didn't know ahead. But now that he knows, there's not much he can do about it. Riordan and Creighton are playing a game of their own, and they won't quit it just on Belden's say-so. They're in the saddle at the Bell Ranch, and Belden will have one hell of a time unseating them, even if he should want to. Which he won't. Not when they're doing what looks like a real good job."

"Belden strikes me as a square-shooter," O'Mara said. "It hit him hard, finding out that they aimed to hang Redondo. No, I figure he'll draw their fangs. He comes from a place where there's law and order, and what a man is used to—well, that's the way he is."

Hockaday laughed, off-key. "You're sure a trusting hombre, Ed. Belden's kind are all for law and order, so long as that pays off. He won't be for it once Creighton and Riordan convince him that they can get away with their sort of game without it boomeranging. All Belden really wants is to cash in on the Bell Ranch. But even if he is a square-shooter like you figure, nothing will come of his meddling. Riordan and Creighton will make him believe that Redondo is a rustler. They'll make him believe that Kolb had a right to throw you off that claim. Belden may be shrewd enough to make money, but hell, he's not so bright about anything else. A man can't spend his life chasing the almighty dollar and still know much about hombres like Riordan and Creighton—or have much feeling for hombres like you and Juan Redondo."

"You could be right, Frank."

"The chances are that I am," Hockaday said. "So you're playing the fool. Ed, watch your step. From now on you'll be a marked man."

He turned away, rode from town.

O'Mara sat there for a long moment, lost in thought. Then he dismounted and led his horses into the stable. After putting them up, he headed toward the hotel to get a room. He had almost reached the hotel when he saw Hal Creighton come from the Territorial Saloon. O'Mara's step faltered, then he strode across the street and said, "Creighton, I want a word with you!"

The manager of the Bell had stopped at the hitchrack to untie his horse. He turned slowly, a man as tall as Ed O'Mara and more heavily built. He was wearing a tweed coat with whipcord riding breeches and military type boots, and a narrow-brimmed Stetson. He was a blond man, ruddy of complexion, coarsely handsome. He pulled his horse away from the rack, and said curtly, "Well, have it, O'Mara. But make it quick."

"What's your hurry? You scared?"

"What's that mean?"

"Why play innocent, Creighton?" O'Mara demanded. "You've got your way. You've had me run off my homestead. Why not be man enough to admit it?"

Creighton looked at him with something like contempt. "Don't come bellyaching to me. You were a squatter, and you were treated like one. But don't get the idea that I had anything to do with what happened to you. I'm not interested in a mere quarter-section of back-country range. Now if you don't mind—" He turned to his horse.

He had a foot in the stirrup when O'Mara caught hold of him. O'Mara pulled him away from the horse and flung him against the hitchrack. Creighton grunted under the impact, hurt. He stiffened, arching his back, his face convulsed with pain.

O'Mara said savagely, "I'm calling you a liar. Kolb's your man. You sent him to claim that location, and I'd gamble that you got the land office records altered—which makes the land agent your man, too. You're a great one for getting other men to do your dirty work, Creighton. Like tonight, when you sent Riordan and his tough hands to hang Juan Redondo on a trumped-up rustling charge. It didn't come off—because of me. I'm warning you now, mister, I'm going to trip you up whenever I can!"

CREIGHTON stood with his hands to the small of his back, squirming. He had collided hard against the hitchrail, but it seemed to O'Mara that he was making too much of his hurt. No man could be that soft, O'Mara told himself. He could see anger in Creighton's face, and hatred. But the man's feelings were sterile, for the time being. He wouldn't fight now. Not that he was a coward. A man who tried to dominate a vast range couldn't be a coward. But he was a man who liked the odds in his favor, not just even, and so he wouldn't be goaded into a fight now.

Creighton said thickly, "I'm only the Bell Ranch's business manager. I leave the actual operation of the outfit to Riordan. If Redondo was stealing Bell stock, it was Riordan's job to stop him. I had nothing to do with it."

O'Mara didn't know whether to be disgusted with him, or to admire him. He liked a man who would fight in the open, but he had to admit that Creighton was playing the game in the smartest, safest way.

"I'm not going for that," he said sourly. "You're the big man at the Bell. You—not Riordan and not Belden. And now you're warned. Watch out for me, friend."

He turned his back to Creighton, then faced him again.

"Watch out for me," he added, "if anything more happens to Juan Redondo."

He went on to the hotel, and he could feel Creighton's eyes on him, hating him.

O'Mara slept late, having no reason for rising early, but he was still in time to get breakfast. A half-dozen men and two women were at the table when he entered the dining room. One of the women was Claire Belden. Her husband was not at the table, which caused O'Mara to wonder if Belden were ill.

The Mexican woman who was both cook and waitress served O'Mara a breakfast of bacon, flapjacks and coffee. Some of the other people finished eating and left as he was being served, and the others, except for Mrs. Belden, left before he had cleared his plate. He had nodded to her upon seating himself, and had received a cool "Good morning" in return. But it was obvious from the way she made her cup of coffee last that she was waiting to be alone with O'Mara, that she wanted to talk with him.

He said, "Your husband isn't sick, is he, Mrs. Belden?"

"No."

"I thought he might be, since he's not having breakfast."

"He had breakfast early," she said, her voice chill and her eyes disliking him. "Then he got a horse at the livery stable and set out for the Bell Ranch." She eyed O'Mara with resentment. "He's postponed our leaving here, because of you. You're a persuasive man, Mr. O'Mara. It's not often that John Belden changes his plans

for someone not important to him."

O'Mara emptied his coffee cup, leaned back in his chair, took out makings. While rolling a cigarette, he said, "Maybe I'm more important to him than he realizes. I won't help him swing a big deal and make a lot of money, but I may show him that there's more to life than making money."

"You're a philosopher, Mr. O'Mara?"

He ignored the mockery in her voice, and smiled faintly. "I'm not much of anything," he said. "I own no land. I have no roof over my head. All I own can be packed on the back of a horse, though I've got a little money in a belt under my shirt. But still I'm important to John Belden. I don't have to be used by him, to be important to him."

"Maybe I should have shot you last night, O'Mara."

"So that you and your husband could board the stage this morning?" he said. "Don't you like this country, Mrs. Belden?"

"I'm not thinking of myself."

"No?"

"My husband isn't well," Claire said. "He has a heart condition, and he should not be excited. He didn't sleep at all, after he returned from wherever you took him last night."

"He didn't tell you where I took him?"

"He told me. I see no reason for your having forced him to go with you."

"We saved a man's life."

"And the man is a cow thief."

O'Mara shook his head. "Juan Redondo has a wife and children," he said. "A man with a family wouldn't run the risk of becoming a rustler. Before you find Juan Redondo guilty, you should get to know him and his family. You might find it interesting. Or wouldn't you like to know anyone who isn't important to your husband?"

MRS. BELDEN rose, stood looking down at him with angry eyes. "Knowing you hasn't been much of a pleasure," she said. "I don't look forward to knowing any more people like you. There is one thing I want to say to you, O'Mara. It's this—you're endangering John Belden's life by involving him in this feud between the people at the Bell Ranch and yourself."

"And my own life," O'Mara said.

Claire made no reply to that. She walked angrily from the dining-room.

O'Mara spent the day doing nothing. He sat on the hotel porch most of the morning, and in the afternoon, after dinner at the hotel, he went to the livery stable, saddled his horse, and rode aimlessly to the south for a couple of hours. Returning to San Marcos, he put up his horse and spent the rest of the afternoon with Sam Lyle at the Alamo Saloon.

Later, he went to the hotel for dinner. Claire was at the table, but she ignored him. A dozen other people were having supper there, and O'Mara had no opportunity to talk with her. He realized there was nothing for them to say to each other, anyway. He was annoyed that he should want to talk to her. He had no right to let Claire Belden become that important to him.

After eating, O'Mara went out onto the hotel porch and leaned against one of the porch-roof posts while smoking a cigarette. The sun was down, and now the ranchers began drifting in for the meeting that was to be held soon at the Alamo Saloon.

They came singly, by pairs, in small groups. They were of all ages, but, young or old or middle-aged, they all bore the stamp of little ranchers. They couldn't be mistaken for dirt farmers or for anything else in the world. Short or tall, heavily built or lean, they were all weather-beaten men in broad-brimmed hats and high-heeled boots. They looked a little clumsy, off their horses.

The small ranchers were solemn men, for the life they led was more often hard than good.

They were little men, compared to the John Beldens of this world, yet they were individualists, so were men of pride. Some of them Ed O'Mara knew, and others were total strangers. But O'Mara, watching

them leave their horses and enter the saloon, knew something about each and every man, for he was one of them.

Red Larsen and his daughter Conchita arrived, the man halting by the Alamo and the girl coming along toward the hotel. Conchita swung over to the hotel, upon seeing O'Mara.

She reined in, smiling.

"Why didn't you visit with us yesterday?" she said. "Instead of riding on in such a hurry."

"Because I was in a bad humor, I guess."

"We would have cheered you up."

"We?"

Conchita laughed. "Oh, I know that Red and Frank aren't much good at cheering anybody up, even themselves," she said. Her light blue eyes sparkled at him. "But I'm not so soured on life."

O'Mara looked her over, wondering how many men she wanted on the string. She was wearing a divided riding skirt with a wide belt that had a fancy silver buckle.

Conchita's mannish shirt was dark blue and had a row of white buttons down the front as big as half dollars. There was a bright green scarf about her neck. Her pearl-gray Stetson hung at her shoulders by its chin strap, and her blue-black hair was prettily tousled.

O'Mara saw her smiling over the way he eyed her.

"Next time I'll visit," he said. "Where's Frank?"

"Isn't he here in town?"

"I haven't seen him."

"He headed for here," Conchita said. "He left home an hour before Red and I. I told him I'd ride with him, but he said something about being in a hurry." She looked beyond O'Mara, at someone who came from the hotel lobby. Her eyes narrowed and her lips thinned. "I don't know what he was in a hurry about," she said vaguely, still looking at the person behind O'Mara.

He glanced over his shoulder and saw that it was Claire Belden who was leaving the hotel.

CHAPTER VI

Little Men—Big Plans

MRS. BELDEN gave Conchita an appraising look, then glanced at O'Mara with a faint smile of amusement. She descended the steps, started across the street toward Macklin's store. She carried herself with unmistakable pride, and a casual gracefulness. She was wearing a handsome gray dress this evening, and O'Mara, though he knew nothing of such matters, sensed that it was the height of fashion. Conchita looked after her, her envy plain.

"Is that *the* Mrs. Belden?"

"That's Mrs. Belden. Haven't you seen her before?"

"No. But I've heard about her."

O'Mara was curious. "What did you hear about her?"

Conchita shrugged. "That she was only half her husband's age," she said. "That may be true, but she's not so young as she'd like everybody to think." Conchita resented the other woman, for some devious feminine reason. "I'd bet she's all of thirty. And she's not as good-looking as I'd expected, from what men say about her."

O'Mara laughed.

Conchita said, "What's so funny, O'Mara?"

"You. Your being so catty."

"What's funny about that?" Conchita said angrily. "I don't have to see the same thing that men see in her, do I? They may call her a lady, but she's no different from any other woman, except for her fancy clothes and her fine airs. You going to the meeting, Ed?"

O'Mara nodded.

"A waste of time," Conchita told him, lifting her reins. "But go ahead. I'll not be lonely for long."

She rode away, heading for the house of Mrs. Fenton, who did dressmaking.

O'Mara looked after her with amusement, then himself headed for the Alamo.

A couple more than three dozen men had arrived for the meeting, most of them two-bit cowmen, but a few were cowhands. Little Sam Lyle was busy behind the bar, his bald head glistening with sweat. The bar was lined with men, and some sat at the tables. Everybody was drinking. There was a lot of talk, the voices making a rumble of sound, but the meeting wasn't officially opened, so the talk wasn't as yet important to O'Mara.

He saw big Red Larsen midway along the bar, and although, from what O'Mara had heard, Larsen hadn't been invited to the meeting, his voice was as loud as any and he was, with an overly friendly manner, trying to get himself accepted by the others. The men nearest him listened to what he had to say, but seldom answered him, and then only in the coolest manner. It was evident that they suspected Larsen of being too friendly with the Bell crowd.

One of the Baylor brothers, owners of the 3B outfit, finally pounded on a table with an empty bottle. When the crowd was quieted down and facing him, Russ Baylor said, "Looks like everybody's here who's coming. So let's get down to business." He looked at Sam Lyle. "How about closing the door, Sam, so as to keep out disinterested parties?"

The saloonman nodded, headed toward the door.

Frank Hockaday came in before Lyle got it closed.

O'Mara said, "Russ, I didn't get an invite to this meeting. So maybe you boys don't want me here." He glanced at Red Larsen, meaningfully. "There may be some others who weren't asked. I guess we're willing to leave, if the rest of you want it that way."

Russ Baylor was a chunky man with a square, red face. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, then said, "You're welcome, O'Mara. It was an oversight that you weren't asked. We know what the Bell did to you, so—well, hang around." He looked in Larsen's direction, and added, "It's no secret that we're organizing to buck the Bell, but we don't want anybody carrying our plans to that bunch. Larsen, there's talk that you're plumb friendly with Hal Creighton of the Bell. It may be just talk, for all I know. But if you're with the Bell outfit, you can't be with us. What do you have to say for yourself?"

Larson was a beefy man with rust-red mustache and a ruddy complexion. He had a rummy's red nose and bloodshot eyes. He affected an injured air now, and said placatingly, "Sure, Hal Creighton and I are civil to each other. He's even courted my daughter a time or two. But that ain't saying that I'm friendly with the Bell crowd. Still, if I ain't wanted—"

HE LOOKED around, expecting somebody to deny that he wasn't wanted.

Russ Baylor said, "We'll take a vote." He pounded the table with the empty bottle, and said loudly, "All in favor of letting Red Larsen stay say 'aye.'"

There were no ayes, and Red Larsen, with a muttered cursing, shoved through the crowd. Sam Lyle opend the door for him, closed it after him. Somebody said, "Russ, here's Larsen's hired hand. What about him?"

Frank Hockaday smiled lopsidedly. "Don't vote on me," he said. "I'm going." He turned to the door.

Russ Baylor said, "Frank, I've known you a long time. And I heard about you siding Juan Redondo last night. You can stay. But just don't tell Larsen what's said here tonight." He looked about. "Say, didn't Juan Redondo come?"

An oldish man spoke up, saying that he was a neighbor of Redondo's and that he'd stopped by the Redondo ranch on his way to town. Juan Redondo, it seemed, had decided to stay home and guard against a return of the Bell crew. He had been afraid to leave his family alone.

Quite a few of those present hadn't heard about the affair at the Redondo ranch, and now were curious. Russ Baylor told what he knew about it. One of his brothers had stopped at Redondo's place that morning, and Juan had spoken of the trouble to him.

"That's how it was, eh, O'Mara?" he said finally. "Belden was there?"

O'Mara nodded. Mention of John Belden's presence at the Redondo ranch with him and Frank Hockaday had caused a little stir of excitement among the ranchers. O'Mara said, "Belden sent the Bell hands home. He said that he would stay over and try to get to the bottom of this business, even though he had planned to start East today. He kept his word. He went back to the Bell Ranch this morning."

There was a lot of time-wasting discussion about Belden, about whether or not he had known about the dirty game played by his outfit. Russ Baylor, the self-appointed chairman, had to bang the table with his bottle again to bring the meeting to order.

He said, "Let's get down to business. We came here to organize. We figure that if we have an association, we'll be strong enough to hold the Bell in line. The problem is to protect the individual. Ed O'Mara lost his homestead claim because of the Bell, and now Juan Redondo is being squeezed. Nobody knows how many little cowmen have been pushed out of the Black Range before now, but there's been far too many. It looks to me as though we should side Juan Redondo as our first official act after we've set up our association. We'll serve notice on the Bell that we'll back Redondo with our guns. Let's take a vote on it. Sing out if you're for it."

There was a chorus of lusty "ayes!"

Russ Baylor grinned. "Motion carried," he said.

He had a ledger on the table, a bottle of ink and a pen beside it. He opened the ledger, and said, "I've talked to some of you, and those of you liked my idea of calling the organization the Black Range Rancher's Association. I've got that name down here, and underneath it I've written what we'll stand for." He picked up the ledger, and read in the sing-song voice of schoolboy reciting. "'We, the undersigned, agree to join together in the defense of our homes and land against all who would try to dispossess us by any means whatsoever. Each member shall have the protection of the Association, and every member hereby promises to do his utmost to protect a threatened fellow member.'" Baylor looked up. "That's the whole of it, friends," he said. "No more, no less. We'll sign up now, and to show that I'm with you, I'll be the first."

His two brothers followed him in signing, then Hank Grierson of the Diamond D signed. The others lined up, and none held back. The few men who were hired hands also signed up, to show that they were siding their bosses. Sam Lyle did not sign, being a saloonman, but he was with them in spirit. Frank Hockaday could not sign, due to his working for Red Larsen.

O'Mara was last to sign, and he said, "What about Juan Redondo? His name should be here."

Russ Baylor said, "I'll get Juan's signature tomorrow."

They voted for a five-man committee to head the Association, and Russ Baylor was voted chairman. Discussion then was about what steps were to be taken about serving notice on the Bell outfit regarding the Association's siding Juan Redondo whose need for protection was the most pressing.

RUSS BAYLOR finally disposed of the matter by saying, "The committee will go to the Bell headquarters tomorrow and lay our cards on the table for Hal Creighton and Matt Riordan. We'll give those two a warning that—"

From over at the door, Sam Lyle called, "Boys, you've got company." He had opened the door to someone's knock, talked with the party outside, and reclosed the door. "Maybe you'll want to have him in."

"Who is it, Sam?" Russ Baylor asked.

Sam Lyle grinned. "John Belden of the Bell Ranch," he said.

Russ Baylor said, "Yeah, let Mr. Belden come in."

This drew a chuckle or two, and a few grins. But most of the men appeared surprised that Belden had the nerve to face the men who considered him an enemy. Sam Lyle opened the door, and said, "Come on in, Mr. Belden." Ed O'Mara was frowning. He wondered if John Bel-

den were a fool, or a shrewd man. This crowd of Bell-fearing men was apt to give him a hard time of it.

John Belden strode into the saloon with that air of self-confidence that was the stock-in-trade of his kind. He had a stature of his own, O'Mara reflected; one that had nothing to do with his physical size, which was, among these men, inadequate. He halted just inside the door, facing the group, and smiled wryly. He appeared well enough tonight, it seemed to O'Mara.

"I was told that a meeting was being held here tonight," he said. "But I didn't expect to find so many men attending it. I didn't know the Bell Ranch had so many enemies, gentlemen."

They stared at him, no one replying to that.

Belden went on, "What has been plotted, gentlemen—the Bell's downfall?" His voice was edged now with sarcasm.

There was still no answer, and even Russ Baylor, who liked to hear himself sound off, seemed suddenly tongue-tied. Ed O'Mara looked at Baylor and some of the others, feeling first a mild contempt for their being cowed, and then understanding them. They were little men, and upon being confronted by John Belden, they were reminded of their smallness.

They were awed by him. He was an Eastern capitalist and he owned the Bell Ranch; he controlled more range than all of them together, and owned fifty thousand head of cattle, and he had come by all that without needing to know how to rope a steer or use a branding iron. He represented power, and against him their newly formed Association, which could cope with men like Matt Riordan and Hal Creighton and the riders backing them, was as nothing.

It was strange, too, O'Mara reflected, because there was not a man in the room who could not have whipped Belden with but one hand. Yet brute strength was never used against the John Beldens. Violence was not done to a man backed by wealth and the power wealth could buy. Why? O'Mara didn't know the answer.

He did know, however, that he must be the spokesman for the group. He was not awed by John Belden's kind. He had been determined to use force to take Belden to Juan Redondo's ranch last night, had force been needed. So he was different from the others, he assured himself. He stepped out of the crowd to face Belden.

"Get it straight, Belden," he said roughly. "We're not plotting the Bell's downfall, or any other outfit's. We've organized to stop the Bell from putting the squeeze on us, and that's the whole of it." He was a lean six feet in height, and he towered above the other man. "You gave me your word that you'd look into what's been happening on this range. You promised not to leave these parts until you got to the bottom of this dirty business. You went to the Bell today, and it's easy to see that Hal Creighton and Matt Riordan gave you a song and dance about us being out to get the Bell. You—"

BELDEN cut in, "I've been convinced of it, O'Mara."

"Yeah? How?"

"I went to Redondo's ranch with Creighton, Riordan and some Bell riders. I saw some cattle hidden away in a box canyon not far from Redondo's headquarters. The brands on those steers had been worked over. One of the steers was killed and skinned for me, and the brand showing on the reverse side of the hide was the Bell brand."

"All right," O'Mara said. "That would be evidence enough if it wasn't possible for Bell riders to have worked over the brands and thrown the cattle onto Redondo's range. I claim that's what happened, because I know that Creighton wants to add Redondo's spread to Bell holdings."

"I think it's evidence that will hold up in court, O'Mara."

"When? After the Bell has hanged Redondo for a rustler?"

"There'll be no hanging," Belden said, his temper flaring. "I've given Creighton orders to avoid all forms of violence. I've instructed him to get the sheriff out here. So much for Redondo, at the moment. We'll discuss *your* quarrel with the Bell.

O'Mara, I've talked with Jacob Kolb. He has given me his word that he is not and never has been in Bell Ranch's hire. He maintains that he filed on the disputed claim, and that you jumped it while he was gone to bring his cattle and gear from Texas."

"I know what Kolb claims," O'Mara said. "And the man's a liar."

"We'll prove what he is," Belden retorted. "I'm going to Las Cruces tomorrow to examine the land office records."

"I can tell you now what you'll find."

"That you filed on that location, I suppose."

"No. That Kolb did."

"Then?"

"The records have been rigged," O'Mara said flatly. "I'm sure of it."

CHAPTER VII

A Long Chance

BELDEN smiled faintly. He took out a cigar, clipped off its end with his gold pocketknife. Then, after lighting up, he went on with his argument. "That's a bit too much for me to swallow, O'Mara. You're suggesting that the Bell Ranch controls the agent of the United States land office. That's an absurdity."

O'Mara's temper was growing short. "Have it your way," he said. "Bring the sheriff in and have Juan Redondo arrested as a rustler. Go to Las Cruces and prove that I'm the liar, not Kolb. But how do you explain away the fact that a lot of little ranchers have been scared off this range by the Bell?"

"I have only your word for it that they were scared off, O'Mara."

"You have the word of these men," O'Mara said, and turned to the silent ranchers. "How about it, boys? Am I right or wrong? Speak up!"

They were no longer so awed by Belden. Russ Baylor spoke up. "You're right, O'Mara!" Some others chorused in, and the remainder nodded their agreement.

Belden said bluntly, "Produce one man who gave up his ranch to the Bell because of fear, and I'll admit that you men have a case." He did not raise his voice, but it was crisp and carried to every man in the barroom. "Prove just one of your charges against the Bell, and I'll remove Hal Creighton and Matt Riordan from their jobs. Give me evidence that Redondo has been framed, if you can. Or that Jacob Kolb is in the Bell's pay. Or that any rancher gave up his range because of fear of Bell riders. It's up to you."

He turned to the door, halted there, looked at O'Mara.

"I hope to be back from Las Cruces in time to catch the next stage out of here," he said. "That will be Saturday morning. You have until then." He smiled, said mockingly, "Good evening, gentlemen," and went out.

There was an uneasy quiet in the saloon after Belden's departure, and finally Russ Baylor said, "Well, what did we expect? He was bound to take the word of his own men, and they were bound to lie to him. Besides, he's got plenty to gain by letting Creighton and Riordan have their own way—and plenty to lose by tying their hands." He looked at O'Mara. "Is there anyway we can prove to him that the Bell bunch is what we claim?"

O'Mara shrugged. "I don't know," he said. "We can't prove that Redondo is being framed or that Kolb is in Bell pay. But maybe—Well, we could locate one of the men who was scared off and get him to admit that Bell riders put pressure on him."

"Yeah," Baylor said sourly. "But who? The men who called it quits have cleared out."

"I might be able to locate Jess Wheeler," O'Mara said, after a moment's thought. "Jess told me he was taking a job with the stage line, as agent at the Red Bluff station. I'll ride over there and have a talk with him, if he's at the station."

The others agreed to that and, after a little more aimless discussion, the meeting petered out for lack of enthusiasm. John

Belden's challenge had shaken the resolve of some of the group and made others doubt that they could, even though organized, stop the Bell outfit from making a conquest of the entire Black Range. They lined up at Sam Lyle's bar for drinks, and shortly some said their good nights, went out to the horses, and headed for home. O'Mara left the saloon, and Frank Hockaday followed him. They walked side by side toward the San Marcos Hotel, halted before it.

"What do you think, Ed?" Hockaday asked. "Any chance of beating the Bell?"

"It depends on our doing what Belden says, proving to him that Creighton and Riordan are what we claim," O'Mara said. "If I locate Jess Wheeler, I can convince Belden. Jess is the kind of a man whose word anybody would take for gospel." He rolled and lighted a cigarette, then said flatly, "I know this much, Frank—there'll be no stopping the Bell once Belden goes back East. That bunch will have a free hand, and will act tougher than ever, to pay us back. I doubt that even this Association business will bother Creighton and Riordan. The members are too widely scattered to act as a unit, and I can't see them riding to the Bell Ranch in a bunch to force a showdown."

"So you're pinning your hopes on Jess?"

"That's about it, Frank."

"It's a mighty long shot."

O'Mara laughed shortly. "Frank, you used to like a good fight and not be half licked before it started," he said. "What ails you? You're sure down in the mouth about this business."

HOCKADAY smiled thinly. "Guess I'm edgy about you, Ed," he said. "You're playing a losing game, and it's going to break me up plenty if I have to be at your burying. Ed, we've known each other a long time. There's not many hombres I give a plugged peso about, but—Well, Ed, I look at it like this. John Belden don't count for a thing. It's Hal Creighton and Matt Riordan who are calling the tune. They're smart hombres ramrodding a tough crew, and they're playing for high stakes. I figure they'll squeeze Belden out, once they've got no more use for him, like they've squeezed out so many two-bit ranchers."

"It'd never work with him," O'Mara said. "He's owner of the Bell Ranch. He's got the law on his side."

"The law," Hockaday said scornfully. "A cow country sheriff, sixty miles away."

"Frank, you talk as though you know something—something definite."

Hockaday stiffened, his face hardened. "You accusing me of something, Ed?"

"No. Why should I?"

"All right, Ed. Just don't."

"You're kind of edgy, all of a sudden."

"Sure," Hockaday said, relaxing somewhat. "I'm worried about you."

O'Mara didn't reply to that, but suddenly he couldn't understand this man who had been his friend for so long. It occurred to him that Frank Hockaday had always been a queer one, a secretive sort and a man of strange moods. The man was sincere enough in his claim that he was worried about O'Mara, but he seemed unduly worried for a man professing to know nothing definite about the plans of the men in the saddle at the Bell Ranch.

O'Mara wondered if Hockaday might not know that some trap had been set for him, having learned it from Red Larsen who was so friendly with Hal Creighton. But if Frank did know such a thing, it was odd that he didn't come out with it.

There was a sound of a woman's laughter somewhere along the dark street, and both men looked in the direction from which it came. They saw a couple strolling along the opposite side of the street, from the edge of town. When the two passed a lighted doorway, O'Mara saw that it was Conchita Larsen and the tall, handsome Hal Creighton. He noticed that Frank Hockaday showed no resentment over seeing the girl with Creighton, seemed wholly disinterested. O'Mara wondered if he wasn't wrong in thinking that his friend was staying at the Larsen ranch because of Conchita.

And if Conchita wasn't keeping the fiddle-footed Frank Hockaday in one place

so long, what was the explanation?

O'Mara didn't know the answer to that.

Hockaday said, "Well, I 'll go find Red. *Buenas noches, amigo.*"

O'Mara said, "Good night, Frank," and turned into the hotel.

When O'Mara saddled his dun the next morning, he found his Winchester carbine missing from its boot. The old man who was Kyle's hostler was nowhere in sight, but Eli Kyle, the livery stable's owner, was in the cubby-hole office. Kyle was a lanky man with bushy sideburns and silver-rimmed glasses. He began searching for the carbine when O'Mara reported it missing, and finally agreed that the weapon was gone.

"I'll ask old Ben about it when he gets back from breakfast," Kyle said. "Maybe he knows what became of it." He was notoriously tight-fisted, and seemed a little worried. "But you know, O'Mara, I can't be responsible for the property my customers leave here."

"You're responsible to a degree," O'Mara told him. "A man puts up his horse, he expects to have it turned over to him when he calls for it. And his saddle too, along with what's on it."

"Maybe you lost it somewhere."

"No. I'm not careless with firearms."

"Maybe somebody stole it off your saddle before you left your horse here."

O'Mara shook his head in disagreement. "It was on my saddle when I turned the dun over to your hostler yesterday afternoon," he said. "It was stolen from here yesterday afternoon or during the night. Between the two of you, Ben and you should know who's been in and out of here, and figure out who would steal a man's Winchester. I'll be back tonight, and I'll want that gun —or the name of the man who got it. I don't like the idea of somebody else carrying a gun of mine around."

He turned to the dun, swung to saddle, rode from the barn.

HE HEADED east out of town, taking the road that had been opened for the freighting outfits and the feeder stageline that ran two coaches a week in to San Marcos. The road turned southeast after a couple of miles, aiming toward the town of Hillsboro, and O'Mara then left it.

He continued through the hills, and at mid-day topped a ridge from which, in the distance, he saw the Rio Grande River. In another hour, he reached the El Paso-Santa Fe road which here ran along the east bank of the Rio Grande. O'Mara swung north along the dusty road, soon passing a string of southbound freight wagons and then coming to the Red Bluff stage station.

The station was a collection of squat adobe buildings located in a vast stretch of empty country. A Mexican was working over by the barn, shoeing a company horse.

Jess Wheeler came from the house as O'Mara rode up to it. He was a tall, gaunt man with a neatly trimmed gray mustache and goatee. He had been a colonel in the CSA during the War Between the States. O'Mara had heard that Wheeler had owned a huge plantation in Georgia before the war.

Dismounting, O'Mara stepped onto the gallery of the station house and shook hands with the agent. Wheeler seemed glad to see him, and invited him inside for a drink. He produced a bottle of Bourbon and a box of cigars, and they made themselves comfortable in the cool, dim main room of the station.

"How are things in the Black Range, Ed?" Wheeler asked.

"Not good, Jess. That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"I thought it might be. You're having trouble?"

"I've been run off my homestead," O'Mara said. "Juan Redondo—you know Juan?—is being squeezed now." He told Wheeler all that had happened during the past few days, emphasizing John Belden's part in it. "Belden said he would go to Las Cruces today to examine the land office records. He'll find that Kolb filed on that location I claimed, of course. That will make me out a liar, in his eyes. And there's no way for me to prove that Jacob

Kolb, with Hal Creighton's help, got the land agent to fix those records. It's the same with Redondo. He can't prove he's not a rustler, and that he's been framed by the Bell. So I thought of you."

"You sure Belden isn't pulling the wool over your eyes, Ed?" Jess Wheeler asked. "You think he is on the level?"

"He seems like a square-shooter."

"Maybe he's making himself seem like one, to cover up for himself. It could be that he's given Creighton and Riordan their orders, and still wants them to shoulder the blame."

"It could be," O'Mara said grimly. "But I'm pinning my hopes on the chance that he's honest. If I could just convince him that the Bell crew is running wild, on just one score, I'd have him in a corner and could force him to do something about Riordan and Creighton. I had some hopes that the little ranchers might stop them by organizing, but now I'm not so sure. It's more likely to start a range war than to hold the Bell outfit in check. And the shooting is apt to start as soon as Belden goes back East. The way I see it, we got to keep Belden here until he's ready to stop the trouble. I've got until Saturday morning to give him some proof that the Bell outfit needs to be hogtied."

Wheeler nodded. "What do you want me to do, Ed?"

"Come to San Marcos with me," O'Mara told him. "Have a talk with Belden. I'd like you to tell him how you were forced to sell your ranch to Bell at a steal price."

"It's not something I like to talk about, Ed," Wheeler said glumly. "I hate to be reminded of it. I played the coward. I was threatened. I was shot at from ambush. One night my house was riddled by bullets by a bunch of riders. Another night a bunch of my cattle were driven over a hundred-foot bluff. I had two hired hands. They quit me, scared off." He paused, stared bleakly into space. "I'm sixty years old, too old to put up a good fight," he continued then. "My wife is in Texas, in San Antonio. She is in poor health, and has nothing to look forward to any more except the day when I can bring her out here to the Territory. I'd hoped to bring her to my ranch. If I'd held out against the Bell, I would have been killed sooner or later. And my wife would have been left alone except for the Negro mammy who is caring for her. So I played the coward and—"

O'MARA cut in, "You played it smart Jess. You saved your life."

"And lost my pride."

"Maybe you'll get it back," O'Mara told him. "Through John Belden. Come with me, tell him what was pulled on you, and maybe we can get your ranch back."

Jess Wheeler thought about it for a long time, and finally O'Mara could see hope begin to glow in his eyes. Wheeler said, "I'll do it, Ed. I can't go with you today. I'll have to get a man to take my place here while I'm away. There's a stage through late this afternoon, and I'll send word with the driver to San Marcial. The company agent there will send a man out. I'll start out for San Marcos as soon as he shows up."

"You've only got until stage-time Saturday morning," O'Mara warned him. "The stage leaves San Marcos at eight Saturday, and Belden will take it, unless you're there by then."

"I'll be there," Wheeler said. "Count on it."

"*Bueno!*" O'Mara said, smiling.

CHAPTER VIII

Hide-out

IN mid-afternoon O'Mara left the stage station, after eating a meal that Jess Wheeler fixed for him, and followed the same route back through the hills toward San Marcos. It was hazy dusk when he quartered down a timbered slope and reached the San Marcos road at the same point where he'd left it that morning. In another quarter of an hour he saw the lights of the town.

He was about a half mile from San Marcos when a voice called, "Ed! Is that you, Ed?"

O'Mara reined in, peered toward a jumble of rocks to the left of the road. "Frank?" he called back. "Yeah, it's O'Mara."

Frank Hockaday came from the rocks, afoot, hurrying. "Ed," he said. "Ed, for Pete's sake!"

"What's up, Frank?"

"You shouldn't have come back, Ed!" Frank Hockaday said. "They found John Belden, and most every man who can sit a horse and carry a gun is man-hunting you. Your friends as well as the Bell crew. Ed, that was a damn fool stunt if there ever was one!"

"What are you talking about, man?"

"John Belden," Hockaday said. "Your bushwhacking him!"

O'Mara got down off his horse and grabbed Hockaday by the shirt front. "You crazy?" he asked savagely. "You saying that Belden was bushwhacked, and that I did it?" He was a little crazy himself, at the moment. "Listen!"

Hockaday had been wildly excited a moment ago, but now he was over it. He said, "Take it easy, Ed. All I know is what everybody is saying—that you killed Belden. I came out here to warn you that they're blaming you. I didn't know if you'd be loco enough to come back, but I had a hunch you might figure you could get away with it. You can't, Ed. The Bell crowd is gunning for you, and the two-bit ranchers are plenty put out because Belden was shot in the back, and because they figure you spoiled their only chance at hamstringing the Bell outfit. Ed—"

O'Mara turned him loose, said, "You know me better than that, Frank." He was over his momentary wildness. "You know I'm no bushwhacker."

"You didn't kill him, Ed?"

O'Mara stared at him, and felt a chill fear. Frank Hockaday really believed it of him. He said, "I didn't kill Belden, or anybody else. What makes you think I did?"

Hockaday looked puzzled. "But, Ed, your gun—"

"What gun, damn it?"

"He was killed with your gun. They

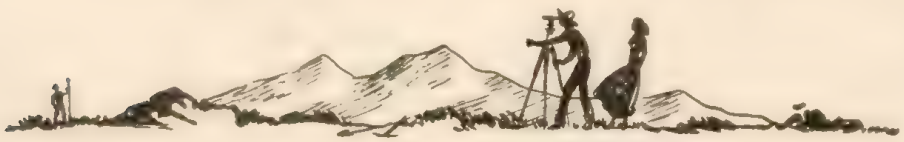
NOT ALL BIG RANGES ARE IN TEXAS

MANY of the larger Texas ranchers drove or shipped their stock to Canada to feed in the early days. There the summer temperature was milder and the grass and water were more abundant, thus giving their stock the chance to put on weight faster.

One such outfit was Day & Cresswell, running the D-C brand in Texas. At one time D-C leased a range in Canada which contained two million acres, paying at the rate of one cent per acre per year rental.

This vast range lay South of Rush Lake, where its headquarters was established. From the headquarters buildings of the ranch to its southern boundary along the Montana line was a distance of 225 miles!

The boys did not ride in to the bunkhouse for dinner when they were working the south range. —*Allan K. Echols*



found it not far from his body."

"My thirty-thirty, you mean?"

"Yeah," Hockaday said. "Belden left town at nine this morning. He was driving the Bell buckboard. He was on his way to Las Cruces, and he counted on catching a stage out of Hillsboro in the afternoon. At noon Russ and Will Baylor found him in Half-Mile Canyon. He was lying beside the road, face down, shot through the back. His buckboard and team had run a little. The Baylors found the rig at the far end of Half-Mile. Russ stayed there, and Will rode in to town. Some of the boys from town went out there, and one of them—Milt Yeager, I heard—found a Winchester carbine on a ledge up the canyon wall. Your initials were cut into the stock, and so word spread that you'd bushwhacked him. They figured that you were on the rim of the canyon, and dropped your rifle by accident after you fired the shot."

O'Mara swore.

Hockaday said, "It wasn't you, Ed?"

O'Mara said savagely, "I'm not that much of a damn fool. I wouldn't bushwhack a man, in the first place. And if I was that kind of a hombre, I wouldn't leave my carbine behind, even by accident. You ought to know that."

"Yeah," Hockaday said. "It seems kind of queer. But—"

"Somebody stole my thirty-thirty off my saddle, in Kyle's livery stable," O'Mara said. "I told Eli Kyle about it this morning. You can ask him."

"Sure, Ed. I believe that, now that I think about it."

"And everybody else will believe it, before I'm through!"

"What do you aim to do?"

"Go to town and find out who stole the gun."

Hockaday looked scared. "You can't risk it, Ed!" he said. "I'm telling you this whole range is stirred up. Hal Creighton has offered a bounty for you, dead or alive. A thousand dollars. That's a lot of money, and a lot of hombres, even men you considered your friends, will try to collect it. Then there's the Bell crew. They'll gun you down on sight, or string you up. Ed, you just can't go into town!"

O'MARA was jolted to the core, realizing that Hockaday was right. He would get no trial, no chance to defend himself against the bushwhacking charge. He had been framed, and he wasn't getting a chance to prove that he was framed. He knew the cow country type of justice well enough; a man wasn't innocent until proved guilty. If suspicion fell upon him, he must prove his innocence. And he would be given no opportunity to do that. O'Mara shook his head, a badly confused man.

"What'll I do, Frank?"

"Get out of sight—if you can," Hockaday said. "It won't be easy, with everybody watching for you. There's not a road or a trail in the Black Range that's not being gun-guarded tonight. And by now word has been sent to the county seat, so the sheriff will circulate wanted dodgers. All I know, Ed, is that you've got to hole up somewhere."

"Yeah—but where?"

"How about Malvado Canyon?"

O'Mara shook his head. "I've heard of it, but I've never seen it," he said. "I don't know whether I could find my way there. I've heard it said it lives up to its name—wicked. As hard to find as it is to get into it."

Frank Hockaday thought about it a minute, then shrugged as though to rid himself of some argument that ran through his mind. "I'll take you there," he said, and turned toward the rocks.

He returned shortly, leading his horse.

O'Mara said, "Frank, I can't drag you into this. If it's found out that you've helped me—well, it'll be too bad for you."

Hockaday smiled his lopsided smile. "I've already helped you, haven't I?" he said. He swung to saddle. "Let's get started, Ed. We haven't got all the time in the world."

O'Mara didn't object further, knowing that once his friend had made up his mind, there was no changing it. He mounted and swung alongside Hockaday

who immediately turned off the road. As they rode through the brush and rocks, O'Mara sensed an excitement in Hockaday. And he realized that this was the old Frank Hockaday, coming out of his shell and showing an eagerness for trouble. Whatever had held him to the dreary riding job with Red Larsen for so long had now been thrown off like suddenly broken shackles.

Frank laughed, and said, "We'll play hide-and-seek with them, if that's what they want!" It was sport for Frank Hockaday.

"You sure you know the way to Malvado Canyon?"

"Yeah. I've prowled these mountains plenty. Figured that I might need a hideout sometime, so I scouted the Malvado."

"Why should you figure that, Frank?"

Hockaday didn't answer, except to laugh again. He was in high spirits, all at once. He was feeling good because there was danger. O'Mara had seen him that way on *tequila* on occasion, and once when, with some Mexicans, he'd been smoking a cigarette made from locoweed. His laughter had a high, crazy sound—like it had had that time O'Mara had found him in that Chinese opium dive in Nuevo Laredo.

A queer one, Frank Hockaday. Either down in the dumps or loco happy, never striking a sensible balance. But still he was a mighty good friend. When a man needed a friend.

They circled wide around San Marcos, and rode where there was no trail at all. There was a moon, but it was smudged over by clouds and so the night was inky dark. For O'Mara, it was like traveling blindfolded. But Frank Hockaday was never in any doubt and finally, long after midnight, he said, "Almost to Malvado Canyon, pardner. And the devil himself won't find us there."

They came suddenly upon a deep gorge from which rose a booming roar. That was Malvado Creek bursting from its underground source at the north end of the canyon, O'Mara knew. Their horses began to act up, spooked by the noise. They swung away from the chasm.

Hockaday said, "There's no way to get a horse down there, so far as I know. Even afoot, you'd better wait until daylight to find a way down. Take your saddle and bridle down with you, Ed. I'll take your horse and turn it loose plenty far from here."

LIKE most riders, O'Mara felt that a man without a mount was only half a man. But he dismounted and off-saddled the dun. Hockaday dropped his loop over the dun's neck.

"I'll come back tomorrow night, Ed," he said. "Look for me here, sometime after midnight. I'll bring you bedding and grub. Anything else you want?"

"You sure nobody'll catch on?"

"There's not a chance of that," Hockaday said. "This is one game nobody can beat me at."

O'Mara gave him some money. "That's for what you'll have to buy," he said. "My gear is at Kyle's livery stable, but you'd better not bother about it. If you can get hold of a Winchester for me—"

"Sure, Ed. Anything else?"

"I don't want to get you into trouble, Frank, but—well, I can't stay in hiding forever. I've got to clear myself. And the only way I can do that is to find out who stole my gun. Would you want to talk to Eli Kyle?"

"Sure, Ed."

"Maybe it'll do no good. But it could be that he knows by now who stole my carbine. There's something else too, Frank—"

"Yeah?"

"If you ever get the chance," O'Mara said slowly, "tell Mrs. Belden that I—well, that I didn't kill her husband. Will you do that?"

Frank Hockaday stared at him frowningly for a long moment, then said, "Sure, Ed, sure." He turned away, taking O'Mara's horse with him . . .

O'Mara began his descent into Malvado Canyon in the gray dawn. The walls of the gorge were precipitous, and it would have been impossible to take the dun into the gorge. O'Mara carried his saddle

down, but abandoned it midway along the face of the wall. Its weight on his shoulder endangered his footing by throwing him off balance. He hid the saddle in a hollow in the rocky wall.

The water was a thunderous roar in his ears that swelled tremendously by the time he reached the canyon floor. Water gushed with tremendous force from a fissure in the narrow end of the canyon, cascaded down over a jumble of rocks in a fifty-foot fall and formed a swirling pool below. The gorge was only fifty yards across at its north end, and the water rushed along a narrow channel in a tumultuous flood.

As O'Mara explored southward, the canyon widened and so did the creek bed. A half-mile through the gorge, the stream widened to about eighty feet and, though still swift-flowing, was more placid because of its shallowness.

There was grass and brush, even some scrub trees, but mostly the gorge was filled with boulders. O'Mara found a hide-out beneath an over-hang of the rocky wall. He sank to the ground, sat with his back to a boulder, and took out makings. A smoke would have to be his breakfast. It was going to be a long day.

Ed O'Mara knew already that hiding-out was going to be hard for him.

CHAPTER IX

Manhunt

FRANK HOCKADAY kept his promise. He arrived shortly after midnight, whistled in signal, and came on toward the canyon's rim when O'Mara whistled in answer. He was towing a spare horse under pack. He dismounted, said, "No trouble. How did it go for you, Ed?"

"Longest day of my life."

"Tomorrow will be longer. The next day longer still."

"Yeah," O'Mara said. "Where'd you get all that?" He nodded toward the pack on the spare horse. "Not in San Marcos?"

Hockaday shook his head. "At the ranch. But Red Larsen don't know about it. He never will. He keeps such a big supply of grub on hand that this won't be missed. Conchita knows, but she won't talk." He dug into his saddle-bag, brought out something wrapped in paper. "Better wrap yourself around this," he said, handing it over. "To keep you going until you can rustle up a meal."

The paper contained two sandwiches, biscuits filled with cold meat. O'Mara, half-starved, began wolfing one of them. Hockaday smoked a cigarette while O'Mara ate. When he lighted up, the flickering glare of the match revealed a look of excitement about him. This was still sport for him. Dodging the men hunting for O'Mara was a lark for Frank Hockaday.

O'Mara said finally, "What makes you think Conchita won't talk?"

Hockaday shrugged "She's one female that can keep a secret."

"Maybe," O'Mara said uneasily. "But why should she? I don't mean anything to her, and Hal Creighton does. If she tells him what you're up to, it'll be too bad for you—and me."

"She knows I'll wring her pretty little neck if she talks," Hockaday said. "Quit worrying. I know Conchita. She won't talk to Creighton, or to anybody else. I had a talk with Eli Kyle, Ed. And with his hostler, old Ben. They told me the names of the men who'd been in and out of the stable during the afternoon and night when your Winchester was stolen. Some of them were townsmen, some ranchers, and none of them would be sneaky enough to steal another man's gun to do a killing. But Jacob Kolb put his horse up there early that night, and took it out again around midnight."

"Kolb," O'Mara said. "Yeah."

"He's tricky enough to pull a stunt like that."

"What'll we do about him?"

"You know where he hangs out, Frank?"

Hockaday shook his head. "He turns up

in the damnedest places," he said. "But mostly he's at the Bell Ranch. He must have a hole-up somewhere around, for when he's not there or busy doing a job for 'em. You want me to try to find him?"

"Yeah. But I'm not going to ask you to."

"You don't have to. But what happens when I find him?"

"Nothing for you. Just let me know."

Hockaday nodded. "All right, Ed," he said. He was silent for a moment, then added, "I saw Belden's wife today. Hal Creighton was with her. They're going to bury Belden at the ranch. Tomorrow. After Creighton took her up to her hotel, after they'd had dinner, I went up to see her."

O'Mara gazed at him frowningly. "I didn't mean for you to see her in such a hurry, Frank. You could have waited. How's she taking it?"

"She's one woman who hides her feelings."

"Oh?"

"Or maybe Belden didn't mean a whole lot to her."

O'Mara let that pass. He didn't like Hockaday's opinion of Claire Belden any more that he liked the man's going to see her so soon afer her husband's death. But of course Frank Hockaday wasn't a man to go easy on another person's feelings. The man was callous without meaning to be.

O'Mara said, "You told her I didn't kill Belden?"

"I told her. But she didn't go for it."

"I figured she wouldn't."

"Don't let it bother you," Hockaday said. "It don't matter much, what she believes." He paused, frowned in thought. "Or maybe it does, at that. She's pretty sharp. She wanted to know why I was so sure you hadn't killed her man, and I had to do some quick thinking. I told her I'd run into you during the night, and that you'd got the drop on me. I don't know how much of it she believed. But I told her you said your Winchester had been stolen, and that whoever stole it did the bushwhacking."

O'MARA said, "You're getting into this too deep, Frank."

"Don't worry about me."

"Eli Kyle will be wondering how you knew I claimed my gun was stolen."

"He did wonder. I told him the same thing I told the woman. He took my word for it, even if she didn't. I tried to get him to admit the rifle was stolen and wasn't on your saddle when you rode out that morning. But, hell, Eli Kyle is like all the rest—sure you're guilty. He claims you raised a fuss about the Winchester just to cover up what you planned. His idea is that you took the gun during the night and cached it outside town, then picked it up when you rode out in the morning."

They talked it over a little longer, then removed the pack from the spare horse. Hockaday had brought provisions enough to last O'Mara for at least two weeks. He had also brought tobacco, matches, an ax, a skillet, and a coffee pot. And a brand-new .30-30 Winchester rifle, with a box of cartridges.

"Time for me to mosey along," Hockaday said. "I'll be seeing you as soon as I locate Jacob Kolb. If I don't find him, I'll show up two weeks from tonight with some more grub."

"All right," O'Mara said. "And obliged —for everything."

He began carrying the grub and gear down into the canyon as soon as Hockaday was gone. He had to make four trips, and it was nearly dawn by the time he completed the job. Then, hungry again, he gathered some brush and built a fire. He made coffee, filled the frying-pan with beans and bacon. When the meal was ready, he killed the fire. Even a trace of smoke might give his position away to manhunters. Or the smell of smoke. If any of them were close to Malvado Canyon.

He wondered while eating how long it would be before somebody got around to searching the Malvado.

Late in the afternoon O'Mara glimpsed a movement on the west rim of the canyon, and dived for cover. He saw three riders

appear, rein in, peer down into the gorge. They were directly opposite him, perhaps three hundred feet above him. O'Mara's heart pounded fast and hard during the five minutes or more—it seemed an eternity—that the horsemen paused there. Fear that they would sight him or his cache of provisions and gear filled him with panic. Even when they withdrew, apparently satisfied that he was not in the Malvado, he felt no real relief.

He thought, "They may take a notion to come down here!"

They reappeared farther south along the rim of the canyon, then withdrew once more and he did not see them again. They had come and gone, but that did not mean that they would stay away. Or that others would not come.

It was clear to O'Mara that he would be caught in a trap if any of the manhunters did come down into the gorge. The treacherous rock walls made it that, thwarting a hasty flight. He considered the swift-flowing stream and, since it escaped from the canyon in some fashion, he wondered if it could not show him an exit that he could use in an emergency.

He waited out the afternoon, hidden in the brush. Then, as daylight faded, he set out toward the south end of the canyon a half-mile away. He saw unscalable cliffs, and a great V-shaped crevice through which the waters of the Malvado flowed. The notch was a forbidding place, but O'Mara, after a moment's hesitation, entered the swirling current and waded into the passage.

It was about fifty feet across at its entrance; after a few yards it widened to twice that distance. The water was up to O'Mara's hips at first but with the widening of the channel it fell considerably. Shortly it was only up to his knees. He continued through the gloomy passage until he reached its far side.

O'Mara looked out into another, far wider canyon. Onto somebody's range.

He could see scattered bunches of cattle in the distance, where the creek, greatly widened, flowed placidly through a land of grass, brush and trees. He could see no ranch headquarters, but the canyon ran on for several miles and it was possible that the owner of the cattle had his buildings at its far end.

The walls of this second canyon were neither as steep nor as high as those of the Malvado. They gradually sloped so that farther south they were gentle, grassy rises. Probably this canyon ended not too far away.

O'Mara would have liked to see the brand of the cattle, but decided that it would be a foolhardy risk to venture out onto this strange range. He had not forgotten that the three riders he had seen had ridden in that direction. They might still be near.

BUT he had learned what he had needed to know. There was an easy way out of Malvado Canyon. A way that Frank Hockaday had not discovered; perhaps one of which few knew. The swift flow of water through the notch would have discouraged anyone coming up from the south to venture into the Malvado from that direction. And cow country men were notoriously leery of fast water.

O'Mara turned back through the swirling current with reluctance.

He was running low on grub by the time Frank Hockaday was due to show up again, and he was edgy. He did not mind being alone. It was having nothing to keep him busy that made him restless. When he met Hockaday, again at midnight and on the canyon's rim, he said, "Frank, this is driving me loco. I can't hide out much longer."

Hockaday said he understood. He had come with a pack-horse and began removing the provisions from its pack-saddle. "Yeah, I know how you feel," he said. "I figured that you'd have a bellyful of it by now."

"You didn't locate Jacob Kolb?"

"He was in San Marcos last Saturday night. But I lost him when he left town. He rode north, but he knew somebody was on his trail and set out to shake me. I've a hunch he's squatting at Tom Naylor's old place. But it's only a hunch. And it

would be too risky for you to go after him, if that is where he hangs out. The Naylor place is too close to the Bell Ranch."

O'Mara thought about it. "How far is it from here, Frank?"

"Ten miles, maybe."

"I'll need a horse."

"I don't like you risking it, Ed," Hockaday said. "Not just yet, anyway. Things will cool off for you some, soon. Then you can make a getaway, or go after Kolb. Most everybody thinks you've got out of the Black Range. There was some talk in the Alamo Saturday night that you were seen down in Mexico. But if you come out of hiding now and are seen—well, there'll be another manhunt on. And this time somebody might get the idea that you're hiding in Malvado Canyon."

"I don't know, Frank. Like I said, this hiding out is driving me loco."

"It's better than getting strung up."

"That Kolb—why do you suppose he killed Belden, Frank?"

"He had a couple of reasons, I reckon," Hockaday said. "If it *was* him. And we can't be sure it was. Maybe it was somebody who got a dirty deal from the Bell. But if it was Kolb, I figure he killed Belden because Hal Creighton gave him orders to. Like I told you before, Creighton and Matt Riordan are playing an underhanded game of their own, and with Belden dead they've won it. They've got the ranch."

"How do you figure that, Frank?" O'Mara said. "Belden's wife would inherit his estate. That would make her owner of Bell."

"A woman," Hockaday said, shrugging. "Her kind of woman. She may own the Bell, but it'll be mighty little she gets out of it, with Creighton and Riordan in the saddle. Look, Ed. My hunch is that maybe Belden gave Creighton and Riordan a bad time of it after what happened at the Redondo ranch. Maybe he threatened to fire 'em. So they called in Jacob Kolb to do away with him. You were a burr under the saddle, so they wanted to fix you at the same time, and did it by making it look like you did the killing."

O'Mara nodded. "That could be Kolb's motive."

Hockaday paused to roll and light a smoke. Then he went on: "I tell you to keep out of sight because things are going to happen that'll take everybody's mind off you. The Bell outfit is on the prowl for sure now. The Baylor brothers' ranch buildings were burned two nights ago. Russ and the other two Baylors were trailing a bunch of steers to the railroad, and nobody was at their headquarters. That fire was no accident, because every building went up in flames. The Bell was paying Russ Baylor back for heading the Association."

O'Mara swore under his breath.

"Then there was Pete Hagarthy," Hockaday went on. "He was found shot dead the night before the fire. That was after Pete came into town and claimed rustlers stole a hundred head of his cattle. He blamed the Bell. It looks like the beginning of a real range war, Ed. Creighton and Riordan are forcing a showdown to clear the Black Range of two-bit cowmen, and I'd bet my bottom dollar they're not doing it for Belden's widow, but for themselves. So the longer you stay under cover, the better your chances of saving your neck."

"But not of clearing myself."

"I'll keep after Kolb. You wait until I've got him pegged."

Hockaday dropped his cigarette, then mounted his horse and caught up the halter rope of the pack-animal. "I'll be seeing you, Ed."

O'Mara nodded, then said, "Listen, Frank, there's a canyon south of here, somebody's range. You know whose range?"

"It's part of Juan Redondo's range," Hockaday said, surprised. "His main range is east of that canyon. You been prowling around, Ed?"

"A little. I found a way out of the Malvado."

"Oh? Well, so long."

O'Mara watched him ride off into the darkness. It didn't occur to him until

later, when he was packing his provisions down into the canyon, that his friend's mood had changed. Frank Hockaday had been in none too good a humor tonight.

CHAPTER X

Face to Face

ED O'MARA endured two more days of being holed up, then he couldn't stand more of it. Late in the afternoon of the third day after Hockaday's visit, he took his new Winchester and set out through Malvado Canyon. He navigated the swirling current through the notch, and came from the water onto what Hockaday had said was Juan Redondo's range.

He sat on a rock and removed his boots, pouring the water from them and wringing out his socks. When he started out again, he made sure that no riders were in sight. He also made sure that this was Redondo's range, getting close enough to some of the cattle grazing there to read their brands. Redondo's iron was an "R" but it was one of those spidery brands. The cattle were Redondo's.

O'Mara went on at a dog-trot, aiming southeast across the canyon, and shortly climbed one of its sloping walls. He came out onto a sweep of undulating prairie, and again saw scattered bunches of cattle. There was rough country not far to the north, in the vicinity of Malvado Canyon.

The sun was low behind the hills to the west when he glimpsed Redondo's ranch buildings a couple miles off. A rider appeared and, catching sight of O'Mara, swung toward him. O'Mara levered a cartridge into the Winchester's firing chamber, and stood waiting.

The big sombrero told him that the rider was a Mexican.

And a moment later, he saw that it was Juan Redondo.

He went to meet the Mexican, carrying his rifle in the crook of his arm. Redondo reined in, stared at him, exclaimed, "*Hola, amigo!* I thought you had gone to Mexico." He dismounted, smiling, friendly. After a moment's hesitation, perhaps uncertain whether or not O'Mara would shake hands with him, he wiped his right hand on his embroidered *chatequa* and extended it.

O'Mara grasped the hand, smiled, and said, "I was hoping you wouldn't try to collect that bounty on me, Juan."

"It is no business of mine that you killed Senor Belden."

"I didn't kill him, Juan. I give you my word for it."

"*Si.* But everybody says—"

O'Mara nodded. "I know they blame me," he said. "Like they said you were a rustler, now they say I'm a bushwhacker. We were both framed, and by the same men. Have they bothered you since that night?"

Redondo shook his head, and suddenly looked troubled. "They have been too busy elsewhere," he said. "But I expect them any day, any night. I have sent my family off to Las Cruces by wagon, to my wife's father who has a store there. They will be safe with him."

"You heard what happened to Pete Hagarthy? And to the Baylor brothers?"

"*Si.* And sooner or later something will happen to me. But you, *amigo.* What do you do here?"

"I've been hiding out in Malvado Canyon," O'Mara told him, and saw how surprised Redondo looked. "But I'm tired of hiding. I'm going to try to find the man I believe killed Belden, to clear myself. I thought you'd loan me a mount, Juan."

"Sure," said Juan Redondo. "I'll give you a horse, and supper too."

An hour after nightfall O'Mara dropped down onto the road that ran from San Marcos to the Bell Ranch. He had just crossed the road when he heard a drumming of hoofs along it. He swung in among a clump of trees, and from there watched a bunch of riders—Bell riders, he supposed—heading toward town at a lope. He rode on after their swift passing, and a half-hour later saw the lighted windows of the Bell headquarters.

For a moment he was seized by an impulse to go there, to confront Hal Creighton. The ranch manager was the man he really wanted. Kolb may have fired the shot that killed John Belden, but it was almost sure that Creighton had ordered the killing. That showdown with him must come eventually, O'Mara was sure, but it was just as certain that now was not the time. A half dozen riders were gone from headquarters, but there were as many more at least still present to side Creighton.

O'Mara put the impulse down, telling himself that he must wait to get at Creighton. He must get to him in another way, through Jacob Kolb.

He turned his back on the lights of the ranch and rode on toward Tom Naylor's place where, if Frank Hockaday's guess was accurate, Kolb was holed up. Naylor had been the Bell's nearest neighbor, and the first of the little ranchers to be squeezed out by the big outfit. Naylor had sold out and disappeared before O'Mara came to the Black Range, and now he was all but forgotten.

Fighting Barber

STILL BORN ALLEY AND TIGER ALLEY were scenes of crime during the Leadville boom. Robber's Roost had a bad reputation and was patronized by a depraved class of men.

Because of atrocious attacks on these alleys, the citizens of Leadville became highly incensed. One night a German barber was attacked on his way home from work. He killed one of the men who attacked him and wounded the other attacker.

The next day civic-minded citizens of Leadville placed the barber in a chair, hoisted him up on the shoulders of the crowd, shouting and cheering, carried him through the streets of Denver and presented him with an expensive gold watch. —*Edna Stewart*

HOWEVER, O'Mara had heard that Naylor had signed a quit-claim for his ranch because a Bell rider—Matt Riordan, gossip had it—had held a cocked gun at his head. Naylor's log house and barn still stood and, as O'Mara came within sight of them, they were dark and silent.

But a long deserted place had a certain feel which the old Naylor headquarters didn't communicate to O'Mara. He reined in, studied the two small buildings, and somehow knew that they were still in use.

Dismounting, he left his horse ground-hitched amid a clump of trees, and went on afoot. He circled house and barn, and heard nothing but his own quickened breathing. He halted behind the house, put an ear to the wall, heard no sound within the place. There was neither door nor window at the rear, so he went around to the front and listened at the door there.

Then he pulled the latch string, and swung open the door.

The cabin had the smell of a recent woodfire and of cooking and of tobacco smoke, not the musty odor of neglect. O'Mara felt a stirring of excitement as he stepped inside and closed the door behind him. He took a match from his pocket, lighted it on his thumb-nail. There was a lamp on a plank table that had a bench on each side of it. He moved to the table, lifted the chimney, touched the match flame to the wick. He replaced the glass chimney, and looked around the cabin's one room.

It was as crude as such cabins always were, but clean and tidy. There was a made-up bunk at one side, and a stove at the other. In a corner near the stove was a stack of kindling, in the other a cupboard holding provisions. On the wall, at the end of the bunk, hung a fairly expensive suit of gray broadcloth and a newish pearly-gray Stetson.

The occupant of the cabin showed his orderliness even here. He had tacked an opened and washed flour-sack to the wall so that it covered his spare clothes like a curtain. O'Mara went through the

pockets of the suit, but found nothing but a couple of cigars in the vest.

On the table was a box of cigars, an ash-tray, and two books. A collection of Shakespeare's plays and Dumas' "The Count of Monte Cristo." A surprising man, Jacob Kolb.

If the occupant of the cabin was Jacob Kolb.

O'Mara extinguished the lamp flame, left the cabin, closing the door behind him. He crossed to the trees where he had left his horse, rolled and lighted a cigarette, and flipped a mental coin. He decided to wait, on the chance that Kolb would return home before too much of the night was gone.

It was a long wait. O'Mara kept telling himself, "Another hour. Just another half-hour—fifteen minutes longer." He had to confront Kolb. Everything depended upon his coming face to face with the man. His life. At midnight he should start back to Malvado Canyon, to reach his hide-out before daylight. But midnight was hours past when he finally knew he dared wait no longer.

He had turned to mount his horse when he heard the *clop-clop* of hoofs.

He froze, scarcely believing his ears. But a rider was approaching, and soon loomed through the darkness. A stocky, bearded figure on a black horse. A black-suited man. He rode directly to the barn, dismounted there, led his horse inside. He reappeared shortly, going to the cabin.

The door closed behind him, then lamplight glowed behind the two windows. O'Mara moved from the trees, his gun in his hand. His heart pounded with excitement, and his breathing was fluttery. He crossed to the cabin, and through a window had a glimpse of Kolb removing his coat. He moved quickly to the door, jerked the latch-string, stepped in as he swung the door open.

"All right, Kolb! This time *you* hold still!"

The bearded man whirled about, a grunt of alarm escaping him. He was so startled that he dropped his coat to the floor. He gasped, "O'Mara!"

He began backing away until he was against the bunk. O'Mara followed him up and hit him a back-handed slap across the face, knocking him onto the bunk. As Kolb lay cowering there, O'Mara pulled the gun from the man's holster and threw it to the far end of the room. O'Mara shoved his own gun against the man's chest.

"Now, friend, let's talk!"

"O'Mara, for God's sake—"

"You know what I want, Kolb?"

"No, I—O'Mara, take that gun away!"

O'MARA smiled in ugly fashion. "That's right, beg! Beg for your life, Kolb, for if you don't I'll kill you sure!" He saw sweat glistening on Kolb's forehead, and the man's lips quivering. Kolb's eyes mirrored his fear, his body gave off an odor of fear. O'Mara added savagely, "Don't get the notion I won't kill you!"

"What do you want, O'Mara?"

"A confession," O'Mara told him. "A confession that you killed John Belden. I want it on paper, Kolb. You got pen and ink and paper here?'

"No!"

"Yes," said O'Mara, and thumbed back the Colt's hammer. "I'd rather have the confession, Kolb. But if I don't get it, I'll be satisfied with your life. You stole my Winchester from Kyle's livery stable. You had orders to bushwhack Belden, and to frame me for it. So you used my carbine and left it where it would be found. You crazy fool, did you think I wouldn't find out it was you?"

"O'Mara, you're excited," Kolb said thickly. "And you're wrong. I didn't kill Belden. I swear it!"

"You're on the Bell pay-roll, ain't you?"

"No, I—"

"Kolb, one more lie and I'll pull this trigger, so help me!"

Kolb licked his lips and swallowed. "Creighton," he said. "He gives me a little money, out of his own pocket. I've known him a long time. I do a job for him now and then, but not killing. I swear it, O'Mara. Not killing!"

"He wanted Belden done away with,

didn't he?" O'Mara snapped bitterly.

"Yes, but—"

"And he wanted me blamed for the killing?"

Kolb nodded jerkily.

O'Mara said, "Creighton was running the Bell to suit himself. He wanted to control the whole Black Range. He was only ranch manager, but that didn't bother him any. He had it planned from the start to take the Bell away from Belden. Then I showed Belden what was going on between the Bell and the two-bit ranchers, and Belden went back there and had Creighton on the carpet. So Creighton decided the time had come to get rid of him. I want it all down on paper, Kolb, over your signature."

He stepped back, gestured with his gun.

"Get busy," he ordered. "Write it down, or I'll—"

Kolb pushed himself up off the bunk, stood swaying. "You're a crazy man, O'Mara," he said thickly. "You'll force me to write a confession of something I didn't do, then you'll kill me."

"All right, so I'm crazy, because I want to wriggle out of a frame-up," O'Mara said. "But I'm not going to kill you if you do as I tell you. I'll let the law do that, Kolb. I'll take that confession to the county seat and turn it over to the sheriff and, damn it, the law should hang you, sure. Now come on. I'm not going to fool around with you much longer."

CHAPTER XI

Talley for Two

A TRUNK was on the floor at the end of the bunk, and Jacob Kolb turned to it. He lifted the lid, knelt before the trunk. His hands were trembling. The trunk was well filled. There was clothing, books, old letters, a bundle of what looked like mining stock certificates, some yellowed newspapers. Kolb took out a small wooden box. It could have held a gun, so O'Mara said, "Put it on the floor and open it with your left hand."

Kolb obeyed. It contained a bottle of ink and some pens.

O'Mara said, "All right. Now get some paper and come over to the table."

Kolb was still on his knees. He was pale beneath his beard. He fumbled in the trunk, finally bringing out a small packet of writing paper. He picked up the box, got to his feet, moved to the table. Seating himself, he laid the paper before him and opened the box. He twisted the cork from the ink bottle, dipped one of the pens, then looked up at O'Mara.

O'Mara said flatly, "You're an educated man. You know what to put down."

Kolb's eyes were bleak with despair. He put pen to paper, began to write. O'Mara, across the table from him, felt some of the tension in himself ease. He eased his gun off cock, and he was about to holster it when Kolb threw down the pen, heaved to his feet, and toppled the table over, all with one quick, desperate effort.

The lamp crashed to the floor, plunging the room into sooty darkness. Then a gunshot roared. O'Mara was half blinded by the muzzle flash. A giant fist hit him a jolting blow in the left side. He felt himself falling. He heaved over in a frantic roll the instant he hit the floor, and Kolb's second shot missed him. Still moving, O'Mara came to his left hand and his knees, and swung his gun up as he tried to locate Kolb in the inky blackness. His left side felt as though it were being jabbed with a red-hot running iron.

He heard Kolb's labored breathing, and saw the dull glint of the man's gun-barrel.

It was O'Mara's hands that shook now, and he couldn't steady his gun-hand as he squeezed the Colt's trigger.

But his shot was echoed by a scream, and by the threshing of Kolb's bulky body. The man, hit, collided with the stove, and it toppled over with a crash and a rattle of chimney pipe. Then Kolb dropped, and after the thump of his body striking the floor, there was a jarring quiet. The place smelled of powder-smoke and of wood ash. O'Mara struggled to his

feet, breathing shallowly. The pain in his side was knife-sharp.

He knew somehow that Kolb was dead, not merely wounded, so he holstered his gun and struck a match. He picked the lamp up off the floor. The chimney was smashed, and glass particles glittered about the plank floor. O'Mara touched flame to the wick, set the lamp on the floor until he righted the table.

Placing the lamp on the table, he turned to look at Jacob Kolb. The man was sprawled face-down by the overturned stove. A derringer with over-and-under barrels lay beside the body.

O'Mara frowned, swore softly.

Kolb had had but two shots, and he'd used them both. If O'Mara had known that, he reflected bitterly, he would not have had to kill the man.

He looked about for the paper upon which Kolb had written at least a few words, finding it amid the litter from the table. Kolb had written three words:

O'Mara killed me.

O'Mara swore again. He crumpled the paper and thrust it into his pocket. There was anger in him, as well as pain. The anger of disappointment. He had had his chance, and had let it slip through his fingers by not having been smart enough. He should have known that a man like Kolb would have a sneak gun tucked away in one of his pockets. He should have known that the man was frightened enough to make a desperate play.

Luck had been against Jacob Kolb tonight. If the derringer's slug had been a little better placed—well, Ed O'Mara and not Jacob Kolb would now be lying there dead.

O'Mara dug a clean white shirt out of Kolb's trunk, ripped a piece of cloth from it. He folded the cloth and placed it against his bleeding wound, buttoned his shirt over it, then went out to his horse.

He dragged himself into saddle, then turned away from there.

The eastern sky was already graying with dawn.

IT WAS full daylight by the time O'Mara reached Juan Redondo's ranch. He thought that he had made it unseen by anyone along the way, but he wasn't sure. His vision was blurred, and there was a roaring in his ears. A dozen people could have spotted him and might even now be closing in on him, for all he knew.

He crossed the ranchyard to the corral, and his knees sagged when he dismounted. He clung to the saddlehorn for a moment, then stripped saddle and bridle from the horse. He saw nothing of Redondo, so, pulling his Winchester from the saddle which he'd dumped on the ground, he turned toward the house with the intention of waiting until the rancher returned. His wound needed looking after.

He pulled up shortly, an incoherent grunt of surprise escaping him.

Juan Redondo lay in the shade of the gallery across the front of his adobe house, just outside the open doorway. He lay on his back, sprawled lifelessly. He had been shot through the heart.

For a moment O'Mara thought he would be sick, then anger came, and that was better. His wound was not so bad if he still could know rage, and how to hate. He saw how it had been. Juan Redondo had heard a rider coming, and had opened his door, only to be gunned down. Some time during the night. "Kolb," O'Mara thought. And for a long moment he cursed Jacob Kolb, loud and savagely.

Kolb was dead. But he was dead too late, for Juan Redondo.

O'Mara could not leave Redondo there like that, his eyes wide and his mouth agape and the flies swarming about him. But he dared not take the body to town; he could not, even had he dared. And he could not give Redondo burial. He hadn't the strength to open a grave. He could only move the body into the house, and that by dragging it. The effort involved sapped what little strength remained, and he was wobbly on his feet when he came from the house and closed the door behind him. His wound was bleeding again.

He went back to the corral and picked up his bridle. The forty-pound saddle was

too much for him and he was content to get a bridle onto the roan he had borrowed from Redondo. He got onto the roan's back somehow, not forgetting his Winchester, and rode bareback away from there.

He was barely conscious by the time he arrived at the notch in the cliffs beyond Redondo's range. He slipped from the roan's back, stood swaying. He removed the bridle and turned the horse loose. Hiding the bridle in some brush then, and with panic gripping him, he forced himself into the gushing stream. The current threatened to topple him time and again, and when he reached the narrow part of the channel, with the water up to his hips, he fought desperately to keep from falling. If he went down, he would not come out of that water alive.

He came through after what seemed an eternity, and dragged himself up the creek bank. There he lay on his stomach for a long time, then forced himself to rise. He staggered like a drunken cowhand, but finally reached his hideout beneath the overhanging cliff wall. He dropped his rifle. He let himself fall.

And lost his slim grip on consciousness . . .

O'Mara came to abruptly, a yell escaping him. He was frightened—by what he didn't know—and tried to jump to his feet. He could hardly move. He was shackled by weakness and pain. He put his elbows against the ground and tried to lever himself upward. He was like that, straining hard and with his shoulders but an inch or two off the ground, when he saw her.

She moved slowly into his range of vision, stood gazing down at him.

Her face was expressionless, but lovely nonetheless. She wasn't real. She couldn't be there, not John Belden's widow. He was delirious, seeing things. His mind was full of wild imaginings. He closed his eyes, then opened them again. She was still there, her soft mass of auburn hair coppery-bright in the sunlight. He said, "You're beautiful," and fell back into unknowingness . . .

He heard himself screaming.

It was terrifyingly real, the blasting of guns and the slugs tearing into him. And Jacob Kolb dying. Every time Kolb died, another Kolb appeared, and each black-bearded figure was armed with an over-and-under derringer pistol that fired into his, O'Mara's, body.

JOHN BELDEN was in the nightmare, too—as many John Beldens as Jacob Kolbs. There was Juan Redondo also, and Frank Hockaday. Redondo's dusky face was all staring eyes and gaping mouth. And Frank Hockaday was laughing like a crazy man, wouldn't stop laughing. Matt Riordan rode through the crowded figures, a cocked gun in his hand. And there was Hal Creighton walking with Conchita Larsen, and the two of them, intent upon each other, were oblivious to what terrible things were happening.

He cried out again, then the nightmare ended.

Hours had passed, for the sun was now directly overhead. He lay wrapped in one of his blankets. He pushed the blanket down, and sat up. His shirt was gone. There was a bandage about his middle, a heavy fold of white cloth wadded against his wound. As before, she came to stand before him. Again he had difficulty believing his own eye.

"Claire," he said. "That's your name, isn't it?"

She made no reply.

He drew his knees up and folded his arms and lay his face in his arms. He sensed her moving about. She said, "Here—drink this."

He lifted his head and saw that she held a tin cup of coffee. He took it in both his shaking hands, and got it to his mouth. The coffee was hot and strong and good. He emptied the cup, let it drop. It rolled close to her feet. She was wearing military-style boots; they seemed incredibly small to O'Mara, and they were, like his own, still damp. She had come into the canyon through the watery notch.

She was wearing an ankle-length riding skirt with a broad belt that had a big

silver buckle. She wore a tan blouse much like a man's shirt and yet becomingly feminine. Her hat was hanging at her shoulders by its chin cord. She was tall and nicely formed.

"How did you get here?" he asked.

"I followed you, O'Mara," she said tonelessly. "I rode up to the Redondo ranch just as you were riding away. I was close enough to—to recognize you. I followed, and saw you come into this place. I've been trying to find you ever since my husband was killed."

O'Mara said nothing to that.

Claire continued, "I wasn't deceived by your friend Frank Hockaday. I knew he'd lied when he told me that he had met you by accident and you held a gun on him, while you denied you had killed John Belden. I knew he must know where you were hiding. I went to the ranch where he works, but the people there convinced me you weren't with them. The other night Frank Hockaday was in San Marcos. I followed him. He had a pack-horse hidden outside of town. I watched him go on with it. He rode west. I learned that Juan Redondo's ranch was west of town, and I knew that both you and Frank Hockaday were friendly with Redondo. So—"

"So," O'Mara cut in, "today you came hunting me at Redondo's place."

"I made up my mind to find you, O'Mara."

"And now you've found me. For what?"

She said, still talking in that spiritless voice, "I planned to kill you, O'Mara."

She took her silver-plated revolver from the pocket of her riding-skirt and pointed it at him.

O'Mara looked from the little gun to Claire Belden's eyes, and after a moment said, "So you changed your mind. Why?"

Claire held the gun on him. "What makes you think I've changed my mind?"

O'Mara smiled wearily. "You wouldn't have fixed up my wound if you still wanted to kill me. You wouldn't have built a fire and made coffee for me." He paused, looking up at her, studying her. "Besides, you're not so sure I'm the man who killed your husband. And it wouldn't be easy for you to pull that trigger. Somebody taught you to handle a gun. Belden, maybe? He taught you not to be afraid of a gun. But it's one thing to shoot at a mark, and another to shoot at a living target. You would have fired that night in the hotel if I'd laid a hand on your husband. You would have protected him. You might shoot if somebody threatened you. But you wouldn't shoot me as I am now."

She lowered the gun. "You understand me too well, O'Mara."

"On the contrary, you surprise me."

"In what way?"

"By having the idea of killing me," he said. "By figuring out where I might be hiding, and then coming to find me. By coming through the water to get into this canyon. By treating my wound. That doesn't hold at all with my first idea of you."

"And what was your first idea of me?"

"A beautiful woman, useless except as something for a rich man to show off. But there's a lot more to you than I knew."

CHAPTER XII

A Friend Is Lost

CLAIRE BELDEN put the revolver away, stooped to pick up the tin cup, and moved away. She returned shortly with O'Mara's shirt which she had washed at the creek and stretched out on a boulder to dry. Holding it out to him, she said, "Useless, am I?"

He said, "I apologize," and took the shirt.

It was nearly dry. Putting it on caused a strain on his wound, and he flinched with pain. She came and helped him, and her hands accidentally brushing his shoulders and chest were cool and soft. He forgot the pain under her touch.

He said, "Thanks. I owe you a lot."

She sank to the ground, nearby, yet well out of his reach.

"You didn't kill him, O'Mara?"

"No."

"It's hard for me to believe that, but somehow I do believe it," she said. "Yet you had reason to want him dead. You had a dispute with the Bell Ranch, and because of it you made him your enemy."

O'Mara shook his head in disagreement. "I had more reason to want him alive," he told her. "Belden owned the Bell, but he didn't control it. I wanted to get at the men who do control it, through him. And another reason why I wouldn't have killed John Belden is—you."

"I?"

"You know I wouldn't do anything to hurt you, don't you?"

Claire looked at him frowningly. "And when did you decide that, O'Mara?"

He shrugged. "The first time I saw you, I suppose," he said. "Or rather, the second time. When I walked into your room at the hotel and saw you brushing your hair." He laughed shortly. "I'd be less than a man if I hadn't noticed what you were like." He waited for her to reply to that, but Claire remained silent. So he added, "The man who killed Belden is dead. I killed him last night."

Her eyes widened with shock.

He told her about Jacob Kolb and how he had killed the man in the gun fight in the darkened cabin.

"But why," she said, shuddering, "did this man Kolb kill John?"

"I know why, but I can't prove it," he told her. "And I've a hunch you won't take my word for it. Kolb was in Hal Creighton's pay. He was hired by Creighton to kill John Belden." He saw her incredulous look. It was more than that, for now she was quickly hostile toward him. "You don't believe it?"

"No," she said flatly . "Not what you say about Hal Creighton."

"Well, we won't quarrel about it," he said. "As I told you, I can't prove it, now that Kolb is dead. I'm in a worse spot than I was before I went after Kolb. I can't get to Creighton. And if I could, the threat of a gun wouldn't scare him into confessing. Look, Claire—what are you going to do about me?"

She got to her feet, stood staring down at him with that hostile look in her eyes. "What should I do about you, O'Mara?"

"You could forget that you found me."

"Maybe I'll find it hard to forget you."

He smiled wryly. "I could make something of that," he said. "If I was a little more stupid or vain. Do as you like about me. I'll be gone from here before you can get back to town, before you can talk to Creighton."

"You can't go anywhere, because of your wound."

"It can't be too bad. A crease, a rib nicked."

"Even so, you should be careful of it."

"Don't tell me you're concerned!"

She shrugged. "I shouldn't be," she said. "For all I know, I may be wrong in letting you convince me of your innocence. As for you—well, you're disreputable looking, O'Mara. With that growth of beard. And the way you live. On the other hand, there's something wickedly attractive about you. Maybe it's because you're a violent man."

"And different from the men you've known?"

She regarded him gravely. "Yes, different," she said, after a long pause. "I'm going now, and you needn't worry that I'll tell anyone where you're hiding, unless I find reason to believe that you've lied about it's having been Kolb who killed John."

"All right," O'Mara said. "About Juan Redondo. You'll see that his body is taken care of and his family notified?"

"Yes."

"And you'll be careful?"

"I?"

"With Creighton. You own the Bell Ranch, and he wants it. Don't forget that."

"Do you think he'd kill me to get it?" Claire said. "That's ridiculous!"

She started to turn away, then faced him again. "I'll be back, O'Mara. Is there anything you want or need, that I could bring to you?"

He looked at her with surprise, then smiled. "Just come back," he said. "That's about all I want or need."

She turned away without replying.

He watched her until he could not longer see her from where he sat, then sank back onto the blanket and almost at once slept. . . .

IT WAS sundown when O'Mara awoke. He was still painfully weak, feeling as though he had just come through a long and severe illness. He sat up and removed the bandage which, he saw with some amusement, was composed of strips torn from Claire's petticoat. The wound was an ugly thing of torn flesh, and just over his lower ribs. Loss of blood explained his weakness. He supposed that he should see a doctor, but that was impossible. He replaced the bandage, then buttoned his shirt. Somehow he managed to get to his feet, then giddiness assailed him. When his brain stopped reeling, he saw that she had placed his money-belt and the tobacco sack, papers and matches from his shirt pockets upon a nearby rock. He shook his head smilingly over the thought of her washing his shirt, for he doubted that she had ever found it necessary to wash one for John Belden.

He set out to build a fire and rustle up a meal. He needed to eat to get back his strength.

It was nearly dark by the time he finished his meal. His cook fire was merely a handful of red-glowing embers. He sat with his back against a boulder, smoking a cigarette and thinking of Claire Belden. It was odd, but he no longer felt lonely and restless here in his hide-out. She had come to avenge her husband's death, and stayed to make halfway friends with him.

Wickedly attractive, she had called him. Different from the men she had known. He grinned over the thought, and the next moment silently called himself a poor fool. She might find him attractive, but that didn't mean she would let herself have anything to do with him. Not a woman like that.

But he lifted a hand and felt the heavy stubble of beard on his face, and told himself he would have to shave before she came again. His razor was with his gear in the harness room of Kyle's livery stable. But he could scrap off the beard with his knife, tomorrow.

The whistle scared him, breaking in on his reverie.

It came from up-canyon, out of the darkness. After his first flash of alarm, he realized that it was Frank Hockaday's whistle. Relieved, he answered it. And shortly saw his friend approaching. He got to his feet, calling, "Come on in, Frank."

Hockaday said, "No fun, coming down that canyon wall in the dark. Not for me, anyway. Maybe you're used to it. Ed, you didn't play it so smart." His voice was thick, and when he drew close O'Mara smelled whisky.

"You mean about Kolb?"

"What else?"

"I didn't have much choice. He was pretty tricky."

"They're sure you killed him, the Bell crew," Hockaday said. "They're fine-combing the whole Black Range for you, right now. Worse still, the law finally showed up. Sheriff Jake Maugher and a couple of deputies. You know what that means, don't you? They won't let up now until they've got you." He was silent a moment, then asked, in an altered voice, "What did Kolb tell you?"

"Just what I figured. He was in Creighton's hire."

"He admitted killing Belden?"

"No. He denied it."

"So?"

"So I still think he was the man who fired the shot," O'Mara said. "But I can't prove it. I'm in worse shape than I was before. Hell, I'm not sorry I killed him. My conscience don't bother me any. You heard about Juan Redondo? There I was waiting for Kolb to show up, and he was out gunning Redondo. What are they saying about Juan's death?"

Hockaday shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "I heard that Redondo was dead. The man who told me said that the talk in San Marcos was that maybe you killed him or maybe some Bell rider did. I guess it depends on which side a

man's on. If he's with the Bell, he blames you. If he's against that bunch, he blames them."

He pulled a bottle from his hip pocket, pulled the cork, handed the bottle to O'Mara. O'Mara took a pull on it, handed it back to Hockaday who took a long drink. Hockaday wiped his mouth on his shirt sleeve, and said, "Ed, you've got to pull out of here."

"Yeah? And go where?"

"Across the Border, if you can make it."

Jumbleweed's Love Song

Ain't got no ranch, ain't got no home,
Ain't got no company—
I'm just a rangeland maverick,
Come, put your brand on me!

—Pecos Pete

"That means I'll have to spend the rest of my life down there."

"Alive. Here, you'll be dead."

"I don't know," O'Mara said. "Maybe I'll make a try at Creighton. He's the man really to blame for Belden's death. Redondo's too. And Pete Hagarthy's. I got nowhere with Kolb, but maybe Creighton —maybe it's worth trying. How tough do you think he is, Frank?"

"Tougher than Kolb. And he's never alone."

"There ought to be a way to catch him alone, some time or other."

"And you'll end up killing him, without clearing yourself," Hockaday said, looking unconvinced.

"That wouldn't be the worst thing that could happen," O'Mara said sourly. "It might save the lives of some other men like Redondo and Hagarthy."

HOCKADAY took another drink of whisky, emptying the bottle and flinging it aside.

"No," he said. "I'm not letting you do it. Ed, I'll help you get to Mexico. You'll be a running target, but somehow I'll get you across the Border. I've got a horse for you, up on the rim of the canyon. We'll keep on the move until daylight, then hole up until tomorrow night and—"

O'Mara thought it over, not liking the idea of running and giving up all hope of ever proving that he hadn't bushwhacked Belden. On the other hand, his position had become desperate. It was now known, because of Kolb's death, that he was still in the Black Range and, as Hockaday said, Bell riders were now fine-combing the entire country. It would not be long before the search reached Malvado Canyon, and this time the manhunters would certainly come into the gorge.

Sooner or later, they would catch up with him—a sitting target. Maybe it would be better to become a running target, as Frank Hockaday urged. Too, there might be no way to catch Hal Creighton alone, and certainly there would be small chance of making the man confess to paying Kolb to kill Belden.

O'Mara felt suddenly helpless. Then he thought of the woman, of Claire Belden. Thought without reason, "I can get to Creighton through her!"

He hadn't heard the rest of Hockaday's plan to escape to Mexico.

And the man said, "What do you say, Ed? You coming with me?"

"No, Frank. I'm playing out my hand here."

"By going after Creighton like you went after Kolb? "

"That's it, Frank."

Hockaday swore bitterly. He wasn't exactly drunk but the whisky was beginning to tell on him. "All right," he said savagely. "That let's me out. We're through, O'Mara, and to hell with you. You're on your own from now on. You savvy?"

"Sure, Frank," O'Mara said. "And I don't blame you."

Hockaday said nothing to that, but turned away at once.

O'Mara watched him until he vanished through the thick darkness of the gorge. He was tempted to call him back, then decided against it. Friendship didn't give him the right to draw Frank any deeper into this mess. As a sitting target, he was risking only his own life. As a running target, he might get Frank as well as himself killed. The Bell outfit was certain to be watching every likely trail out of the Black Range to Mexico.

But he'd lost a good friend tonight.

CHAPTER XIII

Claire Opens Her Heart

NEXT morning, O'Mara moved his camp. He found a site close to the notch in the awesome cliffs at the south end of the gorge, a dreary spot, but one that seemed safer. If surprised and forced to fight, he could fort up among some of the huge boulders and slabs of rock. Or if forewarned of men coming into the canyon, he could make his escape through the notch, and hope that he would not be pursued through the water which looked far more dangerous than he had found it to be. Beyond that, he had no plans except to get back his strength.

His wound was still a fiery thing, but if he was slow in beginning to heal, it at least was no worse. There seemed to be no dangerous infection. He spent the day lying on his blankets, with occasional excursions from his new camp to scan the canyon and its rim.

It was not until late afternoon that he saw anyone, and then it was Claire. She came through the notch, forcing her slow way through the rushing water. He hurried to her, wading out into the water to give her his hand. She was out of breath, panting. When they were out of the water, she sank to the ground with a sigh of relief.

"O'Mara," she said, "I don't think I'll be able to go through there again. It scared me this time. I nearly went under at the deep part."

"Good," O'Mara said. "You'll have to stay with me."

"You're brash, O'Mara."

"Why shouldn't I be? You came here of your own free will."

"Yes. But not to be made love to."

"You'll have to expect that—from me, from other men," he said. "You're no ordinary woman, Claire."

She laughed at him, and said, "I feel half drowned. The other time I was here, you were unconscious and I could take off my clothes and dry them. But now I'm apt to catch my death of cold."

He knelt before her, pulled off her boots, then went to fetch a blanket. She rose and he draped the blanket about her shoulders. She removed her dripping riding-skirt and he spread it out on a rock in the sunlight. She sat down again, wrapped in the blanket. She was grave now, gazing at him in a troubled way, and said, "I saw Hal Creighton last night."

O'Mara hunkered down, took out makings. "And?"

"I—I think you're right about him."

"Keep talking."

She watched him spill tobacco into a paper, then said, "I'd gone to bed early, but I was restless and couldn't sleep. I dressed and left the hotel, and walked out to the bridge over the creek south of town. He was in town and—well, he followed me. He was full of questions."

"Questions?" O'Mara said, lighting his cigarette. "About what?"

"About how I happened to find Juan Redondo dead. And why I had gone there. I told him the truth about why I'd gone there. But I didn't tell him that I didn't find Redondo's body, or that you had told me he'd been killed. Then he asked me what my plans were. He asked me if I wouldn't like to stay on here. And—and he wanted to know if I would consider marrying again."

"Marrying him, he meant?"

"Of course."

"He's rushing matters, isn't he?"

She gave him a bitter smile. "Men," she said. "Aren't you all like that? Haven't you been rushing things, too, with me?" Her voice was scornful. "Why do you all think that a widow is such an easy mark? Yes, Hal tried to convince me that marriage with him would be a fine thing for me."

"And did he convince you?"

"I've been a widow less than a month."

"He's an attractive man. He's your kind, an Easterner."

"Are you trying to convince me, O'Mara?"

He gave her a thin smile. "You know me better than all that," he said. "Look—I've never been backward about asking for what I want. I want you. It isn't possible that I can have you, but that doesn't stop me from wanting you. I'm smart enough to realize that in your eyes I'm not worth much, that I wouldn't rate high in your estimation even if I wasn't a live target for a big bunch of manhunters. And I can see that a man like Creighton—"

CLAIRE, broke in on him. "O'Mara."

"Yes, Claire?"

"Don't place me on a pedestal," she said. "I don't rate that. I have my faults and weaknesses. Maybe I'm not bad as some women are bad, but I'm no angel, either. I came from a mining town in Pennsylvania. My father was a Welsh coal miner, and he had seven of us children to feed and clothe. My mother died when I was fourteen. We were horribly poor, and I always believed that our poverty killed my mother. I ran away from home a month after she died, determined not to lead a life like hers had been. I went to the big city to—well, to have it good. I got a job as a kitchen maid in a big house." She paused, laughed bitterly. "I did have enough to eat, anyway. Next I got a job as a waitress, and again I ate well. I clerked in a store, and didn't eat so well. Then through one of the store's customers, I got in with a show troupe. I got to be an entertainer, of sorts. It was a hard life, almost as hard as my mother's. I endured it for years. Then I met John Belden. He was one of a number of men who thought I wasn't too respectable because I was a showgirl— Do I bore you, O'Mara?"

"You'll never bore me, Claire."

"Thanks," she said drily. "Well, I discovered that John wasn't just an ordinary stagedoor-Johnny. He'd seen me on the stage, and for the first time in his life he set out to meet a showgirl. He was rich, and I wanted to be rich. He was willing to marry me, and I married him. I liked being a rich man's wife, and I liked and admired my husband even if I didn't love him. He was kind to me. He'd been a widower, and his first wife had been nothing like me. So he was kind to me. And in return I kept up my part of the bargain. I was a good wife to him. Can you believe that, O'Mara?"

O'Mara nodded. "I can believe it."

Claire's face saddened. "Having everything I wanted should have made me happy," she continued. "But it didn't. Somehow it didn't. I was actress enough to pretend that I was happy, but my acting didn't convince John. He was an intelligent man, and he knew. He once surprised me by saying that he would give me my freedom if I ever met a man I could love and who could make me happy. I would never have asked for that, never so long as he lived. I respected him too much, and I knew his happiness was at stake. He needed me. He had two children, a son and a daughter. The daughter is nearly as old as I am. Under his will, they inherit everything—his entire estate, except the Bell Ranch. He left that for me because I fell in love with this country the first time we came here on a visit several years ago. He explained his will to me, and I agreed that it was only fair, to his children. So you see, O'Mara, I'm not a particularly nice person."

"John Belden must have thought so."

"I should have been in love with him."

"You couldn't help it if you weren't."

"No, I suppose not," Claire said gravely. "But I'm telling you all this so that you know that if I ever do marry again, it will be for a reason other than what money the man has. It won't be as Hal Creighton sug-

gests, to have a man look out for my affairs. I don't say that he isn't attractive. I know the Larsen girl finds him so. But for me, at least, his attractiveness would wear thin in a short time. And I'd keep reminding myself that he'd married the Bell Ranch—not me."

"You told him you wouldn't marry him?"

"No. I'm shrewd, O'Mara."

"What's that mean?"

"I told you I think you're right about him," she replied. "He grew angry when I showed no enthusiasm. And he told me bluntly enough that I should be careful I wasn't making a mistake. He had hold of my arm when he said that and—" She showed O'Mara her arm. There were ugly bruises just above the elbow, blue-black against the whiteness of her skin.

O'Mara swore under his breath.

"He's a brutal man," Claire said. "I know that now. And he showed me that my being a woman won't keep him from being brutal to me. He told me I'd better think it over. There was a threat behind his words, O'Mara." She shivered. "I think he's capable of it—of having me killed!"

O'MARA'S face was rocky, his fists closed into fists.

"So I didn't antagonize him any further," Claire went on. "I told him I would think about it. I promised to see him tonight." She looked pleadingly at him. "What shall I tell him?"

"Where are you going to meet him?"

"He said he would come to the hotel."

O'Mara was silent a moment, thoughful. Then he said, "Tell him you want to take a walk with him. Bring him to the creek bridge. And I'll be there."

She gave him a frightened look. "No—no, Ed!" she exclaimed. "It wouldn't be safe. They're hunting for you again, blaming you for killing both Kolb and Redondo. You mustn't!"

O'Mara flung his cigarette away, took her hands in his. "It's got to be that way," he said. "I can get myself out of this mess only through Creighton. And there's more than my own life at stake. There's your safety. And I'm thinking of all the little ranchers who will be targets for Creighton and his cohorts if he's not stopped. I'm not safe here, anyway. It won't be long until they find me here."

"Ed, I'm frightened!"

He pulled her to him, into his arms. She *was* frightened. She was trembling violently, and her lips, when he found them with his own, were cold. But then the fear went out of her, and her arms went about his neck. There was passion in her and O'Mara, forgetting his danger, responded in kind. . . .

They waited for dusk, and they waited too long. Claire was already wading into the stream when they heard voices shouting back and forth. She turned and looked at O'Mara with alarmed eyes, and he, quickly facing up-canyon, saw a half-dozen men coming toward them.

Panic gripped him. Then, as always when he had a scare, he felt a rising anger. He shouted at her, "Keep going! I'll follow you!" She obeyed, moving swiftly into the deep channel and toward the murkiness of the notch.

A man yelled, "There's somebody!"

A gunshot crashed, and O'Mara heard the shriek of a slug. The men came running toward him until he opened fire with his rifle, hitting one of them. The others dived for cover, then opened up with heavy shooting. All but one used revolvers, and the range was too great for accurate hand-gun shooting. The one who had a rifle worried O'Mara, who exchanged a couple useless shots with him, then plunged into the stream.

He had a glimpse of Claire well on her way through the cut, then his foot slipped off a rock and he went under as he lost his balance. The current swept him along, and he came to shallow water with a wild threshing. He lost his rifle, but Claire caught up his hat as it was swept along toward her. He managed to gain his feet, gasping for breath. He heard her calling to him to hurry. He followed her toward her horse, running on wobbly legs.

The horse was a sorrel gelding from

Kyle's livery stable. Claire had left it tied to a bush. Jerking its reins loose, O'Mara swung to saddle, then gave Claire a hand and pulled her up with him. He kicked the sorrel, yelled at it, lifted it to a lope.

The crack of a rifle told him that at least one of the manhunters had navigated the notch. He heard no shriek of a slug, so knew they were already out of range. He began to breathe easier. The manhunters had left their mounts up on the rim of the Malvado, and by the time they climbed from the gorge it would be too dark for them to pick up his trail.

It was already full dark when he and Claire reached Juan Redondo's ranch buildings. He headed the sorrel directly toward them, hoping to get a mount for himself there. But the corral was empty. Whoever had come for Redondo's body had turned out the horses.

CHAPTER XIV

A Dangerous Woman

KEEPING away from the trace of a road that led from the Redondo place to San Marcos, O'Mara took to the hills. An hour of hard riding brought him and Claire Belden within sight of the lights of the town.

O'Mara reined in, and lowered Claire to the ground. He dropped from saddle, awkward and uncomfortable in his sodden clothes. Claire was wet to the waist, and he knew that she must mind the clammy feel of her wet clothing even more than he did. She looked badly frightened as well. She gripped his arm with both hands.

"Ed, you've got to get away from here—far away!" she said fiercely. "If anything happened to you, I'd want to die!"

"Steady, darling. It's all right."

"All right! How can you say that?"

"It will be all right," he said. "Just help me get hold of Creighton, and it will be all right—I promise you. You go on into town and change your clothes. When he shows up, bring him to the bridge. I'll be waiting for you there."

He swung the blowing sorrel about, held the stirrup for her. Claire mounted reluctantly, then looked down at him with frightened eyes. "Ed, how can such things be?" she said chokingly. "Men killed and —"

"Claire, don't lose your nerve," he said. "I need you. You've got to give me a hand with Creighton, and after that I'll have cleared myself or have started for Mexico. Can you do it?"

"My nerve's all right, Ed," she told him. "But if anything goes wrong for you I couldn't bear it."

"Nothing is going wrong," he said, and slapped the sorrel hard on the rump.

He watched her ride down toward town, then turned toward the creek which flowed past San Marcos. He forgot his damp clothes, ignored the fact that he still hadn't got back his strength. The thought of coming face to face with Hal Creighton excited him.

But by the time he reached the wooden bridge across the creek he still hadn't figured out how he was going to handle the man. A gun wouldn't scare Creighton into confessing, and O'Mara realized he hadn't strength to use his fists on the man. He doubted that even a beating would get him anywhere with a fellow like Creighton. But still he was eager for the meeting.

He concealed himself in some bushes along the creek's bank, not more than twenty feet from the bridge. He hungered for a smoke, but his makings and matches were wet. A couple of riders appeared from the south and crossed the bridge with a great clatter of shod hoofs striking the planks.

An hour passed, and the better part of another. He began to fear that Claire would not be able to handle Creighton. He argued against that, telling himself that a woman like Claire Belden would have her way with any man. It occurred to him that she might cross him up, betray him. After all, he knew so little about her. He was thinking himself into an unreasonable edginess.

Then a couple appeared along the road from town, strolling along in the casual manner of couples everywhere. They might have been lovers. They talked in low voices, and laughed together. Despite Claire's lack of success on the stage, she was a good actress.

They reached the bridge, halted, and faced each other. Creighton took Claire in his arms, with a possessive self-confidence. O'Mara rose, drew his gun, moved toward them with no more sound than a shadow. He jabbed the muzzle of his gun into Creighton's back, and said, "All right—stand still!"

Creighton gave a violent start, dropped his arms from Claire.

"O'Mara?"

"Yeah, O'Mara."

O'Mara held his gun in his left hand, still pressing it against the small of Creighton's back. He felt for a gun on the man, with his right hand, found one beneath Creighton's coat in a shoulder holster. He tossed it into the creek. Then, remembering how Jacob Kolb had carried a sneak gun, he felt Creighton's pockets. Satisfied that the ranch manager had no second weapon, O'Mara moved around to face him.

Creighton showed no fear. Instead, there was an ugly look of rage on his face.

Looking at Claire, he said harshly, "Now I'm beginning to understand."

He struck out with his left hand, hard to Claire's face, knocking her down. Swearing, O'Mara clubbed at the man with his gun. The barrel raked the left side of Creighton's face, and he dropped to his knees crying out with pain. He stayed like that, holding both hands to his face. Blood seeped through his fingers.

O'MARA started a second blow, then checked it. He moved to Claire, helped her rise. Even in the darkness he could see the mark of Creighton's hand across her cheek. The blow had brought tears to her eyes. But she wasn't crying. She said huskily, "I'll be all right, Ed."

"I'll kill him for that," O'Mara said grimly. "So help me, I'll kill him!"

"Ed—no! That's not the way."

He knew that she was right, and suddenly he knew what he was going to do with Hal Creighton. He stood over the kneeling man, pointing his gun. Creighton lowered his hands, looked up with hate-filled eyes. The bleeding was from a gash over his left cheekbone. Creighton wasn't handsome at the moment, nor was he now debonair of manner.

"What do you think this will get you?" he demanded.

"What do you think I want?" O'Mara retorted. "With you dead, how long do you think the Bell crew will go on gunning for me?" He shook his head. "Not long, mister. I got Kolb, and now I've got you. Next it will be Matt Riordan." He thumbed back the hammer of the gun.

Creighton stared at the weapon. As O'Mara had long ago realized, there was no arguing with a cocked gun. Creighton's manner altered, as he too came to the same conclusion.

He said thickly, "What's the way out, O'Mara?"

"Who said there's a way out—for you?"

"There's got to be. Killing me won't help you."

"Keep talking."

"A deal," Creighton said. "Be reasonable."

"The only deal I'd make would get you hanged," O'Mara said savagely. "It's a bullet through your brain now or the gallows later. If you want to take your chances with the law, all right."

"A confession, eh?"

"Yeah. Before witnesses."

"It's a deal, O'Mara."

O'Mara laughed, off-key. It had been easier than he had anticipated. It seemed that a cocked gun was the answer in this sort of game. He said, "All right, friend. We'll find the witnesses and you'll talk. But don't get the notion that you can renege, once there are witnesses. I'm just desperate enough to shoot you in front of witnesses as here."

"Ed," Claire cried, "someone is coming!"

O'Mara heard the quick beat of hoofs

along the short length of road between the town and the bridge. The rider was almost upon them. He said, "Stay where you are, Creighton. You'll get no help."

The rider reined in, said sharply, "So this is what you've got yourself into, Hal." It was Conchita Larsen. The girl threw back her head and laughed wildly. "Somebody told me you'd walked out this way with Mrs. Belden, darling. I came along to spoil your love making, but this is better than anything I could have done. So you've got him, O'Mara! And on his knees!"

Creighton yelled, "Conchita, get back to town! Tell Matt Riordan!"

"Why should I? You two-timing—"

"Conchita!" Creighton pleaded, like a beggar.

O'Mara moved toward the girl, but she was too quick for him. Creighton's plea had touched her, and for the moment her jealousy was forgotten. She reined her pinto pony about, slapping it hard with her quirt. O'Mara grabbed at her but his hand merely brushed her thigh. Conchita raced away, back to San Marcos.

A scream from Claire brought O'Mara swinging about just in time to see Creighton on his feet and rushing at him. O'Mara hit him on the temple with his gun. With a yell of pain, Creighton reeled back against the guard-rail. As it gave he lost his balance entirely and toppled over the rail, dropping from sight. O'Mara caught Claire by the arm.

"Come along!"

He hurried her off the bridge and into the brush, then headed toward the town with her. She protested, but O'Mara said, "It's my only chance!" If Matt Riordan turned out with a bunch of riders, they would hunt him down in short order—if he ran from town. San Marcos would be the safest place for him, at the moment. He would not be expected to hide there.

HE AND Claire had run no more than a hundred yards when voices started a loud yelling in the town. O'Mara bore to the east, rushing Claire along with him. In moments more a big bunch of riders, shadowy figures in the darkness, streamed from San Marcos, heading for the bridge.

O'Mara and Claire ran on, circling around the edge of the town. They crossed the road, and gained the north side of San Marcos, racing for the back door of the Alamo Saloon.

Gaining the door, O'Mara pushed Claire inside and followed her, closing the door.

This back room was dark and empty except for some storage. He stood still for a moment, catching his breath. Then he whispered, "Wait here. I'll be right back."

He moved across the room, feeling his way, and opened a door to an unlighted hallway that led to the barroom. What he could see of the barroom was empty. The excitement stirred up by Conchita had taken Sam Lyle's customers out to the street and perhaps out to the bridge. Sam Lyle stood in the front door, peering out into the street.

O'Mara called, "Here, Sam," and the saloonman turned. Shock plain in his face as he saw O'Mara, he came hurrying across the room.

"Ed, what—"

"Listen, Sam," O'Mara said hurriedly. "I just tried to do something that misfired. I've got Mrs. Belden in the back room. I've got to hide her from the Bell outfit, from Hal Creighton. Would you want to help me?"

Lyle ran a hand over his bald head, a look of bewilderment on his homely face. "Mrs. Belden!" he muttered. "Sure, Ed. I'm still with you against that crowd. Let's take her upstairs before the customers get back."

He closed the door so that no one could see them from the street, while O'Mara went for Claire. The stairway was an open one at the rear of the barroom. Above was a gallery with several rooms along it. Lyle took them to his own living quarters, a shabby but comfortably furnished room. He drew the window blind before lighting the lamp, and O'Mara closed the door. No one had come into the place while they had hurried up the stairs.

Lyle said, "What's it all about, folks?"

Claire was still breathless and a little frightened, but she did not seem upset over having been brought into a saloon. O'Mara admired her for that; most women would have raised a fuss about such a thing.

He said, "Creighton had John Belden killed, Sam. By Jacob Kolb. I had him ready to make a confession when Conchita Larsen happened along. But he admitted enough in front of Mrs. Belden to prove to her at least that he is guilty. He's after the Bell Ranch for himself. With Belden dead, he figured Mrs. Belden would see him as a husband." He glanced at Claire, who had seated herself in an armchair but without relaxing. "Tell Sam that I'm telling it straight, Claire."

She nodded. "It's so," she said thickly. "He didn't even try to deny he was guilty. He knew what Ed wanted of him."

"What are you going to do now?" Lyle asked. "You've stirred up a hornet's nest. Matt Riordan and a lot of the Bell riders are out gunning for you right now, Ed."

O'Mara began pacing back and forth. He took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. He looked desperate. "I don't know," he said. "First, I've got to find a way to protect Mrs. Belden from Creighton. I know it sounds loco, but I'm scared he'll try to have her done away with. She's the only person really standing in his way, standing between him and the ranch." He halted, looked frowningly at Sam Lyle. "Is the sheriff around these parts?"

"Yeah. Hunting you."

"What kind of a man is he? A square-shooter?"

LYLE shrugged. "Like most lawmen, Jake Maugher stands in with the big boys. And Creighton is the biggest hombre in the Black Range. In a showdown, he'd probably have to play the game straight enough. And he'll have to give the lady protection."

"Can you get word to him, Sam?"

"Sure."

O'Mara thought about it for a moment, then said, "Send Frank Hockaday. He's a little sore at me for not hightailing for Mexico, but he'll do anything to hurt the Bell bunch."

Lyle frowned. "I don't know, Ed," he said slowly. "That Hockaday—like I told you, he gives me the creeps. There's something I don't like about him. I just don't trust him. But—well, if you say so, I'll send him for Sheriff Maugher. There's one thing, though. It'll be Mrs. Belden's word against Creighton's. And Maugher won't be able to arrest him for killing on that alone."

"Just get Maugher to protect her."

"All right, Ed. But what about you?"

"I can't stay here," O'Mara said. "I'll—"

"You'll be safe enough here," Lyle cut in. "Safer than anywhere."

O'Mara nodded agreement to that. "It's just that I don't want to get you in too deep," he said. "Besides, I can't be here when the sheriff comes."

Claire asked, "Ed, where will you go?"

She rose and moved toward him. She was wearing an attractive dress of some dark-brown material that rustled with her movements. It was soiled from contact with the bridge when Creighton had knocked her down, but still it enhanced her beauty. "Your wound still isn't healed," she insisted. "You have no horse. So many men are hunting you. Ed, I'm afraid to have you leave here!"

CHAPTER XV

Treachery

LYLE watched Claire and O'Mara wonderingly, astonished by their intimacy.

O'Mara finally said, "I'll stay here until late tonight, until things quiet down. Then I'll take my chances of getting a horse at Kyle's. There's only an old man there at night." He turned to the saloonman. "Sam, I've a sudden hunch that I'd better have a talk with Sheriff Maugher. But it will have to be on my terms, so that I still have a chance to make a run for it if I can't

convince him I didn't kill John Belden."

"I don't know about that, Ed," Sam Lyle said. "In your boots, I'd light out for Mexico, pronto. But I'll tell Maugher you want a pow-wow with him. When and where and how do you want it?"

O'Mara began pacing again, thinking it over, and at last said, "I'll meet him at Jess Wheeler's old place. Tomorrow night. Or the next night, if he can't make it that soon. But don't tell him where the meeting's to be, Sam. I don't want him setting a trap for me. Listen. Tell Frank Hockaday I want him to do this one last thing for me. He's to bring the sheriff to Wheeler's. He's to leave San Marcos at dusk with Maugher, and he's to do some circling around, just in case Maugher has tipped off somebody to follow them. Once he's sure they're not being followed, Frank can head for the Wheeler place. I'll be waiting there."

Lyle nodded. "Sounds all right," he said. "There's just one thing."

"Yeah, Sam?"

"Are you dead sure you can trust Frank Hockaday?"

"Except for you, Sam," O'Mara said, "Frank is the only man I do trust."

Sam Lyle had to get back to his bar, and when O'Mara and Claire were alone he took her in his arms. He was sure of only one thing in the world, and that was her love for him. It was strange, he told himself, a woman who had had so much falling in love with a man who had so little. Yet it was good.

Her husband's being dead so short a time did not change that. She could still respect his memory, and yet give her affections to another man. For she had never been in love with John Belden. The husband had known that, but he had known, too, that she had lived up to her part of their bargain and had been a good wife to him. Her life was now her own, and to O'Mara it seemed right that she should be in love with him.

Right and wrong. Wrong because it was possible that she would lose him as she had lost John Belden, by way of a bullet.

Claire whispered, "Don't do what you plan, darling. Don't risk it. I'm afraid to have you meet Sheriff Maugher. I have a feeling that only grief wil come to us if you meet him."

"It's my last hope."

"He's friendly with Creighton. He'll never take your word for anything."

"We can't be sure of that," O'Mara said. "Like I said, it's a hope. It's better than running. And if I can't make Maugher see how things really are, I can still run."

"Take me with you, Ed!"

"No."

Tears welled in her eyes. "I—I think I'll die if I lose you," she said thickly. "I'll want to die. What will life be for us if we can't be together?" She strained against him. "Where will you go, Ed?"

"Mexico, I guess."

"I'll follow you," she said. "I'll find you, somehow."

He looked at her soberly and saw that she meant it. He said, "All right, Claire. I'll send for you."

But he couldn't visualize the two of them together in Mexico. He tried to, but his mind wouldn't conjure up the picture. He knew then that it would never be. He would either clear himself when he talked to Sheriff Maugher or he wouldn't come out of the meeting alive. He was sure of this—he had waited too long to run, to Mexico or anywhere else.

It was two o'clock when Sam Lyle returned to them, having closed the Alamo for the night. He said, "I sent a town kid to Red Larsen's ranch to tell Frank Hockaday that I want to see him. From what I hear, Sheriff Maugher and his deputies are hunting you out around Malvado Canyon, Ed. It seems as though the Bell crew didn't bother to get word to him that you showed up around here. Matt Riordan and about a dozen Bell riders are scouring the countryside for you. A couple of them came in about midnight, for some whisky, and they figured that they'll peg you as soon as its daylight. They figure that since you had no horse, you're bushed up close by."

"What about Creighton?"

"They picked him out of the creek, unconscious," Lyle said. "I didn't see him, but I heard he was marked up pretty bad. They say he was crazy mad, when he came to."

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know, Ed," the saloonman said worriedly. "And don't get a notion to go after him again. Wherever he is, he's sure to be waiting with a cocked gun in his hand. Ed, do you want me to get a horse for you?"

O'MARA shook his head. "You're doing enough for me," he said. "You're apt to be run out of town if it's found out you've been hiding me here."

Ed O'Mara left the Alamo a few minutes later, by the rear door.

The livery stable was at the edge of town, so he could circle wide beyond the buildings and houses to reach it. But tonight, even past two in the morning, lights burned in San Marcos and people were about the main street. The excitement hadn't died. They wanted to know how the grim game of hide-and-seek would end.

Some would want to see Ed O'Mara brought in by the Bell riders, dead or alive. To such people the manhunt was merely sport. There might be some who hoped the Bell would fail and that O'Mara would get away. They would be the more sensible people, aware that if he were hunted down the Bell would be one step closer to controlling the entire Black Range.

So the town waited. And O'Mara, moving through the darkness like a horse-stealing Indian, was determined that they should have their wait for nothing.

He gained the livery stable, stood for a time in the shadows of its side wall. So far as he could see, no one was near the big plank building. The old hostler was probably dozing in the cubby-hole office, with no interest at all in the outcome of the manhunt. A lantern on a post just inside the open doorway cast a dim glow through the stable, and O'Mara made his cautious way along the runway leading to the stalls.

He chose a gray gelding, a fine animal in the Bell iron, and smiled wryly over the thought that it might be Hal Creighton's mount. The saddle on the wall of the gray's stall made him feel sure it was Creighton's horse. The saddle showed little wear, and there was no catch-rope on it as there would have been on a cowhand's rig. There was a Winchester rifle in the scabbard, new as the saddle.

O'Mara talked to the gray in a low, soothing voice and rubbed its sleek neck before attempting to saddle it, making friends. The animal was well gentled, and O'Mara sadded without difficulty. He backed the mount from the stall, led it along the runway. The sharp pounding of its hoofs did not arouse the hostler.

At the doorway, O'Mara swung to saddle. The gray pranced a little, but did not buck. O'Mara rode from the building.

And came face to face with three riders coming into town at a lope!

His first impulse was to wheel the gray about and make a run for it. Then, realizing that would give them an easy target, he kicked heels to the horse and continued toward them. A yell lifted. "O'Mara!" Matt Riordan had recognized him.

O'Mara grabbed for his gun, but Riordan got the first shot. However, the Bell man had jerked his horse to such a quick stop that it reared, and his aim was off. And O'Mara fired before Riordan could shoot again.

Riordan's thick body jerked in the saddle. An incoherent cry ripped from him. His horse came down, began a wild bucking. Riordan was thrown, and the looseness of his body told O'Mara that he was badly hit, perhaps already dead. The two riders with him were so taken by surprise that they were slow in bringing their mounts to a stop and getting out their guns. O'Mara kept the gray running. He twisted in the saddle, fired two wild shots in the hope of forestalling pursuit.

Racing away from town, he kept to the road for about a mile, then took the

hills. The gray ran strongly, and was a good night horse. When O'Mara reined in atop a timbered ridge, the animal was winded but breathing easily. He heard no sounds of pursuit, but after a time caught the racket of several horsemen traveling toward San Marcos. They rode steadily, at an easy lope, and were soon gone.

O'Mara rode on, keeping to the higher country, and at dawn he halted on a slope that overlooked the Baylor brothers' range. He tethered the gray to a juniper, loosened the cinches, then stretched out on the ground, telling himself that he would rest but not sleep. His weakened condition betrayed him however, and shortly he dozed off.

The sun was high and bright when he awoke. Hungry. He could see the charred ruins of the Baylor buildings and the camp which was now their headquarters. Two of the Baylors were at work clearing away the rubbish of the burned ranchhouse, and late in the afternoon the third brother rode in from the range.

O'MARA waited until dusk to ride down to the camp, when they were at supper. They stared at him with surprise as he reined in at the edge of the camp.

"How about a hand-out meal, boys? I'm half-starved."

"Come help yourself," Russ invited. "You sure look in bad shape, Ed."

There was no hostility here. O'Mara dismounted and joined them at chuck. The Baylors were not men to be swayed at a thousand-dollar bounty offer, as O'Mara well knew. Also they hated the Bell outfit as violently as O'Mara did, and with an almost as good reason. After the meal, sitting by the cookfire and smoking cigarettes, he told them of the happenings during the past day and night. Russ Baylor swore upon hearing that O'Mara had downed Matt Riordan in a gun-fight, and said, "If you killed him, it's good riddance. I blame him for burning us Baylors out."

O'Mara hadn't told them about his planned meeting with Sheriff Maugher. He meant to keep that a secret, and when Russ asked, "What are you aiming to do now, Ed? Make another try at getting to Creighton?" he merely nodded in answer.

"Count on us if you need help."

"I'll do that, Russ," O'Mara said. "Maybe you'll hear from me in the morning. Right now I've got something to do—alone."

He thanked them for the meal, borrowed some tobacco and cigarette papers, then mounted the gray and rode back the way he had come. Once out of sight of the Baylor camp, he turned toward the old Wheeler ranch. It was nearly dark now, so he felt comparatively safe to be on the move again. He came within sight of the abandoned ranch headquarters two hours later, and immediately dismounted and tethered his horse.

He took the Winchester off the gray's saddle, and afoot moved warily toward the dark buildings. There he took cover amid some rocks and brush a hundred yards short of the place, and settled down to wait. The moon was low in the southeast, huge and blood-red. It climbed, grew smaller, lost its ruddy color. O'Mara hungered for a smoke, but a voice in his mind seemed to warn him against making a light.

Nearly two hours passed, and then he heard the clopping of hoofs of a horse moving at a slow walk.

A single horse.

The rider appeared among the deserted buildings, then O'Mara lost sight of him. There was a long quiet, but finally Frank Hockaday's familiar whistle sounded. O'Mara answered it, and left his cover. He walked toward buildings, still not seeing Hockaday. He halted by the house.

"Frank?"

"Yeah, Ed?"

"Where are you, pardner?"

"Over by the barn," Hockaday said. "Come on. It's safe."

O'Mara felt a quiver of fear. Somehow he knew it wasn't safe. Yet Frank was alone. He called, "Didn't you bring Sheriff Maugher, Frank?" He thought that perhaps the lawman was waiting somewhere out in the darkness, leery

about coming in to face a suspected killer. Hockaday didn't answer, and O'Mara started working toward the dark bulk of the barn.

He got an answer as soon as he stepped into the open.

A shot from Frank Hockaday's gun. And a second shot.

He acted without thinking, whirling to get back behind cover. But he tripped as he whirled, and fell sprawling. The second shot came the instant he went down, so his clumsiness saved his life. He had started to pick himself up, but as he was in the act of rising some instinct warned him against that. He sagged down, as a hit man might have done and simulated a groan. A wounded man's groan.

And no third shot came from the shadows of the barn.

THERE was a long silence, and O'Mara had to fight down the temptation to jump up and run. Fear had hold of him; it tried to pick him up and force him to run. But his back would be too broad a target, and it wasn't possible that Frank Hockaday would miss a third time. O'Mara moved, inching toward the corner of the house.

"O'Mara! You hear me, O'Mara?"

Hockaday called out with a noticeable uncertainty in his voice. As a man would call to a person he thought might be dead. Or as he would call out in a house he considered empty. Hesitantly, doubtfully.

O'Mara wriggled forward another couple inches, his right hand vise-tight on his rifle. He could feel sweat on his face, feel it trickling down his spine. He moved again, hoping the darkness dulled the vision of the man behind him. He waited a few seconds and shoved forward again. He had lost his hat in falling, and the left side of his face scraped the ground. He swallowed dust with each breath. His mind was rocking still from the jolt of finding out about Frank.

For he knew now—he had been against him all the time. Frank had!

From start to finish, and this was the finish.

CHAPTER XVI

One-Man Cleanup

TENSED, O'Mara heard the scuffing sound of a boot on gravel. Frank Hockaday was coming toward him, to make sure. He gripped the Winchester with his left hand, worked the lever with his right. Then he rolled over onto his back, jerked to a sitting position, brought up the rifle and squeezed the trigger. And in that one swift flow of movement he sighted the shadowy figure of Hockaday.

The shot roared in his ears and the muzzle flash half blinded him. He leaped to his feet, whipped around, dived for the corner of the house. Frank's sixgun roared again, and O'Mara heard the thump of the slug against the plank wall as he reached his cover. He knelt down at the corner of the building, ready with the rifle, but Hockaday was again hidden in the shadows of the barn.

O'Mara called, "Too bad, Frank! Too bad you missed those first shots. Too bad for you. You're good at bushwhacking, but no good at putting up a fight. It's the other way around for me. You know how this will end, don't you?"

There was a lengthy silence, then Hockaday answered, "Yeah, I guess I do."

"Want to throw out your gun and give up?"

"What for—to hang? No, I'd rather go out quicker than that."

"All right, Frank. All right—*friend.*"

Hockaday didn't like that word now. He yelled, "I gave you plenty of chance, damn you! I saved your hide all the while they were gunning for you! I begged you to run for it!" He swore bitterly. "But you had to play it smart! You had to stay and stir up a mess! I could have collected that bounty on you easy enough. But I figured we were friends. I figured I owed you plenty, but when you wouldn't pull out like I wanted, I figured I'd evened the score for all you'd ever done for me. I told

you that night that I was through with you. Didn't I, O'Mara?"

"Yeah, Frank. We're square. And I'm glad we are. That makes it easier."

"Why didn't you run? Why'd you have to play the fool?"

O'Mara swore. He'd heard Frank Hockaday whine like that before, when down on his luck and in a blue mood. Pitying himself, and wanting sympathy. Well, he wouldn't get sympathy now—not this time. A .30-30 slug. That was the final pay-off for Frank Hockaday.

O'Mara said, "I was your friend, all right. The only friend you ever had in your life. But you forgot that when my enemies gave you your orders. I was a blind fool. I should have figured you knew Belden was going to travel that road that morning. And you knew I was going to see Jess Wheeler. You were the only man at the meeting who hadn't reason to be afraid of the Bell outfit. And the only man with any connection with that bunch. So I should have guessed you reported to Creighton. He gave you orders to kill Belden and to frame me for the killing. It wasn't Kolb. Kolb claimed he hadn't killed Belden. So it was you, Frank—you! But why, man? Why?"

There was no answer.

O'Mara said, "Why, Frank? You never were much good, but what turned you into a bushwhacker? Was it sport? Or was the pay so high you couldn't turn it down? How much did you get for killing Belden, Frank? And for framing me? How much did you get for killing poor Juan Redondo?"

A wild yell came from Hockaday, then his gun began blazing.

O'Mara was calm now. Slugs were probing for him, but he remained steady and marked the killer's position. He squeezed the .30-30's trigger and heard Hockaday's scream echo the shot. He saw Hockaday come reeling away from the side of the barn, dropping his gun and then, after a couple more lurching steps, pitch forward onto his face.

O'Mara rose and walked toward him. Hockaday was still alive, but his breathing was ragged. O'Mara turned him over onto his back, gently.

"Frank—"

"Ed, listen." Hockaday choked, and for a time it seemed that he would not be able to talk again. O'Mara knew the man was dying. Hockaday lay gasping for minutes. Then he mumbled, "It was the girl, Ed. Conchita."

"What about her?"

"I—I wanted her. The only way I could have her was to get hold of some money, a lot of money. I—"

He had another spell of strangling. O'Mara urged him to lie still, but he wanted to talk. Conchita wanted to get away from this wild country, he told O'Mara. She was afire to live in a city and, knowing how Frank felt about her, she had urged him to get money enough to take her away. He had been enough in love with her to do as she asked.

A RANCHER named Carter had sold out to the Bell, and had been paid in cash. Hockaday had set out to rob him, but Carter had put up a fight and Hockaday had killed him. He had hidden Carter's body, and had thought that he was safe. But he had been seen by Jacob Kolb, and Kolb told Hal Creighton. Creighton had sent for him, and had told Hockaday he had a job for him.

Creighton wanted some ranch that was north of Bell, but the owner wouldn't sell. The manager had offered Hockaday five hundred dollars to get rid of the rancher. Creighton had made it clear that he would tip off the law about Carter's killing if Hockaday refused to do the job.

"I must have been loco," the dying man said bitterly. "But I got to like killing. It was like some men hunt deer or grizzlies for sport, Ed. Bushwhacking got to be sport for me. Besides, Creighton paid me five hundred dollars for every man I killed. I cached the money, and I didn't tell Conchita I had it. Funny thing, Ed, but once I got to killing I didn't want her so much. I didn't even care when Creighton beat my time with her. You savvy, Ed?"

He was begging to be understood, but O'Mara, even though he said, "Sure, Frank, sure," would never understand the murky reasoning of Frank Hockaday's warped mind. He did realize, however, that Frank had always been a queer one. There'd been a devil in him always, and he couldn't control it.

Hockaday was silent a long while, then he said, in a hoarse whisper, "I knew you'd found out too much, Ed, when Sam Lyle told me who wanted to see the sheriff. You figured it out about me, didn't you?" He didn't wait for a reply. "I knew then that I had to kill you. So I told Creighton I was going to finish you off tonight. But I guess it just wasn't in me, *amigo.* I hadn't it in me to kill you. That's why I wasn't able to hit you when I tried."

O'Mara was so intent upon his dying one-time friend that he was oblivious to all else. When a voice called, "O'Mara!" he started violently. The voice said, "Take it easy, O'Mara. It's Russ Baylor."

O'Mara rose, watched Russ Baylor walk toward him. A moment later his brothers loomed through the darkness. All three of the Baylors carried rifles. O'Mara gazed at them uncertainly. They stared at the man on the ground.

"Hockaday!" the burly Russ said. "Why him, Ed?"

"I was wrong. Frank was the bushwhacker, not Kolb."

"He set a trap for you, eh?" Russ said. "We figured you were up to something, so we followed you. We lost you in the dark, but figured you were headed for the Wheeler place. So we headed this way. We left our horses in some brush when we heard the shooting. It's lucky for you we did come. You're getting more company. We spotted some riders headed this way. They'll be here any minute now, and I'd gamble they're Bell riders. If Creighton is with them—"

One of his brothers, Chris, cut in, "I hear 'em."

O'Mara, too, heard the drumming of hoofs now. Hockaday had told Creighton he would kill O'Mara tonight, and evidently the man wasn't putting too much trust in the bushwhacker's word. Having learned that the meeting was to be at the old Wheeler place, Creighton was coming to make sure of his man.

O'Mara said, "We could settle this now. You Baylors with me?"

Russ said, "That's why we're here."

O'Mara and Russ Baylor lifted Frank Hockaday, carried him into the ranch house, laid him on the floor. The other Baylors took cover in the barn. In the house, O'Mara waited at the doorway and Russ, opening a window, steadied his rifle over the sill. They would have the Bell riders in a crossfire if they rode into the ranchyard.

There were eight of them. O'Mara saw them halt by the corral at the side of the barn. A voice yelled demandingly, "Hockaday! You there, Hockaday?"

They came on, spreading out across the yard.

One said, his voice rough with anger, "I told him to wait here. That stupid—"

Another rider cut in, "He's around. There's his horse beside the barn."

Another man said, "It could be O'Mara got him." His voice came from low in the chest, a big man's voice. It was a voice with authority behind it.

O'Mara called, "Hockaday's in here. Creighton, you're covered by enough guns to empty every saddle! But the first to go down will be you—if that's what you want. Drop your guns, the lot of you!"

And Russ Baylor yelled, "Or start shooting, Creighton! I'd just as soon have you do that!"

The belly-voice with the ring of authority bellowed, "Hold on, there! This is the law, and I won't have any more bloodshed!"

It was Sheriff Jake Maugher speaking.

THE sheriff was a game one, O'Mara had to admit. He rode straight toward the house, reined in facing the doorway where O'Mara stood. He was a fat man with a flabby face. "You're O'Mara?"

"That's right," O'Mara told him. "And I've got you and your friends boxed. I've been run like a chicken-stealing coyote by

a pack of hounds for so long I'm sick of it, Sheriff. This is as far as I'm going to run. I've got Frank Hockaday inside, and he's ready to tell you he bushwhacked John Belden—along with some others—and was paid by the man who brought you here. If you need more than Hockaday's word for it, talk to Belden's widow. I've got Hockaday, and you'd better grab the man who hired him—Hal Creighton!"

Sheriff Maugher grunted with surprise, and said roughly, "You loco, O'Mara?"

"Get down, Sheriff. Come in and talk to Hockaday."

"You figure you need a hostage, O'Mara?"

O'Mara laughed. He could afford to laugh. He had won, and the game was over. "You're already a hostage, Sheriff," he said. "Can't you see this Winchester pointed at your chest? Come on now, and bring Creighton with you."

Just as O'Mara knew that he had won, Hal Creighton knew that he had lost. As the sheriff looked around at him, Creighton swore bitterly and raked his horse with his spurs. The horse wheeled to the reins, but before it got running there was a crash of gunshots and Creighton was knocked from its back. All three Baylors had cut loose with their rifles. Creighton, bullet-riddled, was dead before he hit the ground.

Maugher cursed, then said more calmly, "So it's like you say, O'Mara?" He dismounted and gave an order to two of the riders, his deputies, who covered the four Bell riders. Maugher came to the doorway, saying angrily, "You and your friends play rough, O'Mara. So will I, if Hockaday don't back you up on what you say."

O'Mara bent over Hockaday. "Frank, square things. Tell the sheriff."

"Sure, Ed," Frank Hockaday murmured. "Anything for a friend."

He talked laboriously, gaspingly.

And finally, the last painful word said, he sighed tiredly and was gone.

O'Mara got away as soon as he had answered Sheriff Jake Maugher's probing questions. He admitted killing Jacob Kolb and Matt Riordan, and the sheriff agreed that he had killed them in self-defense. And O'Mara kept the big gray wearing the Bell brand running all the way to San Marcos.

It was long after midnight when he rode into town. He roused the hostler at Kyle's with a lusty yell, and left the gray in the stable doorway with its head drooping and its sides heaving. He dog-trotted along the dark and empty street, coming to the Alamo just as Sam Lyle, his last customer gone, was about to lock up.

"O'Mara!"

"Yeah, Sam. It's over."

"The sheriff never came here to talk to Mrs. Belden," Sam said sourly. "That no-good Frank Hockaday! I gave him your orders, and he said he'd do what you wanted. But I wasn't sure."

"It's all right, Sam," O'Mara said. "It's over. I'll tell you about it after I've seen her. Is she all right?"

"Yeah, all safe and sound. I've turned my room over to her. She didn't want that, but—well, I told her I had to keep her safe or you'd take the hide off me." Lyle grinned hugely. "I'd bet the day receipts she's awake and waiting for you. Go on upstairs, Ed."

O'Mara went upstairs, and said, as he rapped, "Claire, it's Ed."

She was awake and waiting for him.

Ed took her in his arms after closing the door. Claire's arms went about his neck. She clung to him and pressed her face against his bristly cheek.

"Ed, it's been a lifetime," she said chokingly.

"Yes. But now we can begin to live, you and I."

"There's nothing to be afraid of now?"

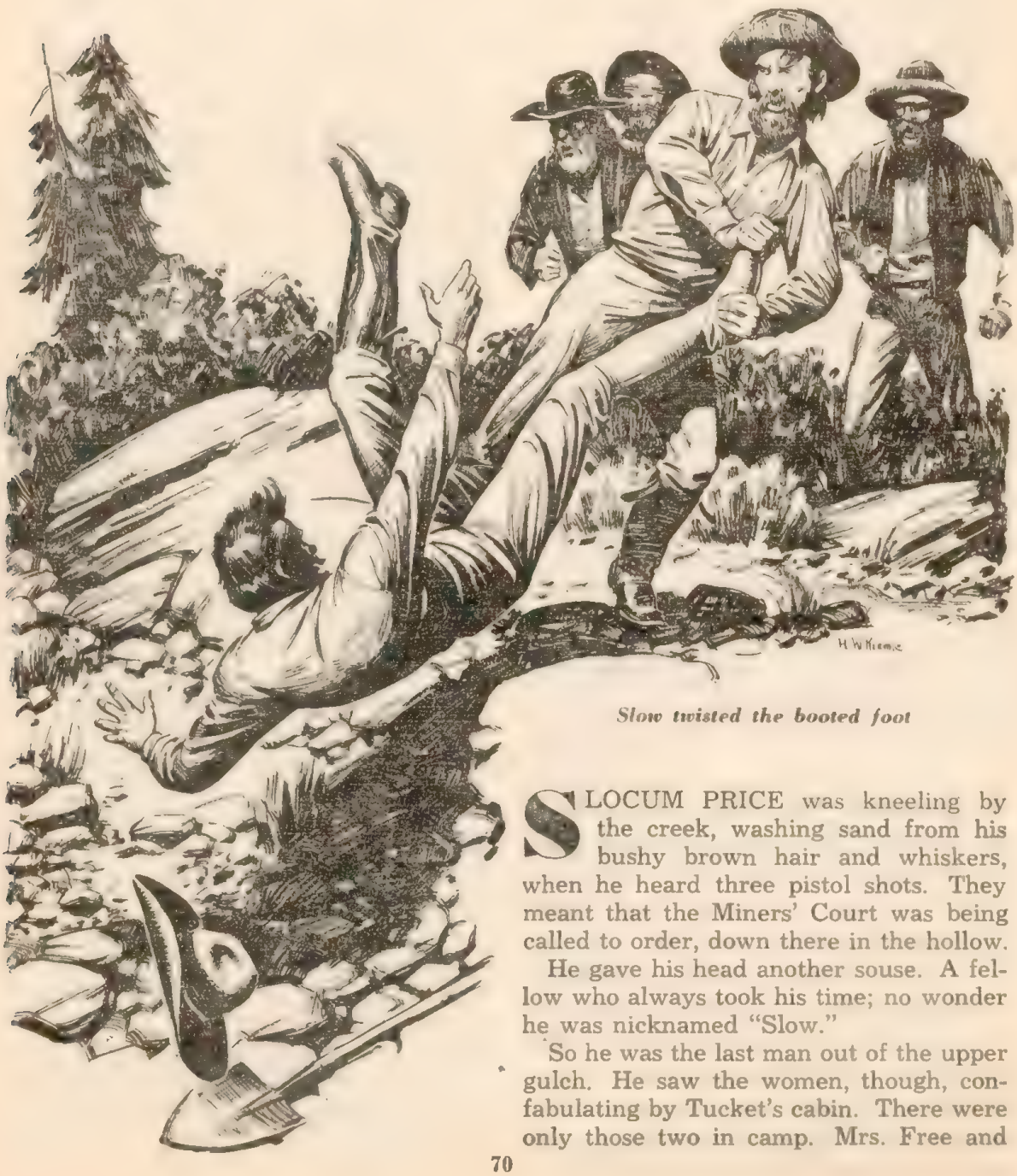
"Nothing at all," he said, and tightened his arms about her.

He was grateful that she didn't question him. He didn't want to talk about how it had ended, or even think about it. Tomorrow maybe, when they were on their way to the Bell Ranch, it would be easier for him. Tonight he wanted no more than to know that he was done with running and that she was his woman. ● ● ●

CHINAMAN'S CHANCE

By DE WITT NEWBURY

"Slow" Price was quick when it came to defending a scapegoat



Slow twisted the booted foot

SLOCUM PRICE was kneeling by the creek, washing sand from his bushy brown hair and whiskers, when he heard three pistol shots. They meant that the Miners' Court was being called to order, down there in the hollow.

He gave his head another souse. A fellow who always took his time; no wonder he was nicknamed "Slow."

So he was the last man out of the upper gulch. He saw the women, though, confabulating by Tucket's cabin. There were only those two in camp. Mrs. Free and

Dorrie Tucket, who kept house for her uncle.

Slow waved his hat, meaning it for Dorrie. Whenever he saw her he thought of that little gold ring. The ring he'd had made in Sacramento, out of his first nugget, and had been keeping for a year.

He had met the Tuckets at Blind Man's Bar, and had moved here with them when the Bar played out. But he had never been able to make friends with Lucius Tucket.

Now Dorrie called out, a worried look on her freckle-nosed face. "Hurry up, Slocum! You *must* do something! Uncle Luce swears he'll have the hide off Tom Ling. It's a shame!"

Slow stopped. "The Chinese, hey? What's he done?"

Dorrie tossed back her tumbled fair hair. "He never did it! Oh, I tried to argue, but you know how pernickety Uncle Luce is!"

Mary Free folded thick arms under a flour-sack apron. "Sorrow the day when we can't buy them Chinese cabbages, and us perishin' for a bit of green stuff."

"Hurry!" the girl urged. "That old man is perfectly harmless!"

Slow started on, swinging his long legs a little faster and wondering what was up.

There'd been some talk of gold robbing, but what was this about Tucket and old Tom? Of course Luce had always been dead against Chinese; but Luce was against everything. He was a cantankerous cuss, and sure led his niece a life.

SLOW went past the shacks and tents, all empty. Past the pits and trenches and untended log flumes. Every miner was down in the hollow, where the jackpines had been cut.

He found them there. Some standing in groups, some squatting on logs or stumps. A rough, raggedy lot, with hair on their shoulders and beards on their chests. At one side half a dozen men guarded the prisoner.

Judge Tarbell was sitting on a stump, behind an upended barrel. He had been elected judge because everybody respected him; a tall, stiff-backed man with a gray goatee and a mighty dignified manner.

He thumped the barrel head with his long Colt revolver. "State your case!" he trumpeted. "Get going!"

Luce Tucket was the lean, mean sort, with wrinkled face and a scraggly mustache. "Judge," he said in a screeching voice, "I accuse this here prisoner of being a damn' Chinaman!"

Tarbell nodded gravely. "He surely can't deny that."

Old Tom didn't try. He stood silent and miserable, a stocky figure in faded blue shirt and shapeless hat. His moon face quivered a little; then was still, expressionless.

"And furthermore," Luce went on, "I claim that the yellow lice are the ruin of Californy! Frisco and Sacramento are crawlin' with 'em, and they're moochin' into all the diggings!"

Slow spoke up then. He didn't care much for the Chinese himself, but he remembered Dorrie's anxiety. "Those other places don't matter," he declared. "We voted to let Tom stay here in Glory Gulch, raising garden truck on that played-out claim."

"I didn't," Luce fumed. "I voted against him, and I still do!"

Another voice broke in, laughing. "Well, I vote to soak his pigtail with lantern oil, set it alight and kick him down the trail!"

Turning leisurely, Slow looked the speaker over. Gib Groody, who worked the richest placer in camp. Gib was big and horse-faced, sandy and sallow. His skin never would get sunburned, only scabby.

"What have you got against the old boy?" Slow asked midly.

Groody laughed again. "Why, Chinamen are dirty, yellow heathen. They've got the leprosy!"

Slow shook his head. "How long since you been to church, Gib?"

"Church!" The other gaped. "Ain't no church to go to!"

"Just so." Slow rubbed his hands on his jean pants, getting ready. "But Tom burns punk to his joss every day. Car-

ries it with him. So he's a better heathen than you are a churchman, Gib Groody."

Luce squalled an objection. Nobody heard him, though. The miners were crowding around in a circle, the seated ones getting up. Because big Groody had knotted his fists. It looked like a fight.

Slow made sure. "For the rest," he drawled, "you're yellower than Tom, a damnsight dirtier — and got more leprosy!"

Gib didn't wait any longer. He jumped, with those fists whirling like red sledge-hammers. While Slow hadn't even put his hands up. It looked as if the fight were over already!

It was over soon, though not as anybody expected. Slow stepped aside, not seeming to hurry. Suddenly his hands were up. He reached one over—a long reach—to Gib's right ear, and the smack of it was quite a sound.

Groody grunted and staggered. He whirled dizzily and swung a root to kick at Slow's groin.

Slow caught the booted foot, heaved and twisted, and Gib Groody fell flat on his back. The fall seemed to jar the whole ground. It certainly jarred Gib.

TARBELL'S gun was booming as he fired three shots in the air. His voice was booming almost as loud.

"Order in the Court! Calm down, all you gents, or I'll wing a few of you for contempt! We're here to try a case, not watch a ruckus!"

The crowd broke up, the men biting off fresh chews or refilling pipes. They sat down on their logs and stumps again, paying no more attention to Groody. He was still lying flat, gasping and wheezing as he tried to get back his wind.

Slow lighted his pipe. He knew Gib had his bellyful of rough-and-tumble fighting, and wasn't armed. It was against the rules to pack shooting-irons in camp.

The judge was an exception. He banged the barrel head with his pistol butt and looked around with a severe eye. "If you've stated your entire case, Luce, it doesn't amount to much."

Tucket gestured with both hands. "I got more to say, you bet your boots! Judge, you know that almost every feller in Glory Gulch is working a flume. You know we can't clean up every day, nor can we keep watching day and night."

"Yes, yes." Tarbell nodded. "That's so."

"Moreover, Judge and gents, you all know what's been happening lately. Man after man has been disappointed in his clean-up! It would be easy for some gold-robbing hound to sneak in the dark of night and scoop out a sluice-box."

There was a growl from the crowd. Once more Tarbell thumped the barrel head. "Shake it up, Luce! Come to the point!"

"Yes, sirree!" Luce screeched, his face all ugly wrinkles. He clawed a pocket and held up a heavy little buckskin bag. "This is it! I've had my suspicions, so today I got a couple of boys to go along. We grabbed Tom Ling, turned his shanty upside down, and this is what we found! I ask you, Judge and gents, what business has a Chinese with a poke of gold dust, unless it's stole?"

The growl came again, rose to a roar. Men surged to their feet, cursing and yelling. "Stretch the yellow devil—fetch a rope!" "Hang him with his own pigtail!" "Tie a rock to it and drown him!"

"We found this, too!" Luce screamed above the racket. "What's Tom Ling doing with such a weapon?" He was holding a bone-handled knife; a long old knife, thin from whetting.

The guards held on to the alarmed Chinese, while others tried to drag him away. Tarbell had to pull his second gun before he could call the rioters to order, and then he sent three shots close over their heads.

By that time Slow Price had decided they weren't going to get Tom Ling! The sight of one frightened old fellow, shrinking and shaking while fifty roughs howled for his life—why, it plumb turned a man's stomach!

When things had quieted, he sang out, "Take it easy, boys! Why don't we let

Tom talk? Let's ask him where he got the gold."

Luce whirled on him angrily. "Want to be lawyer for a heathen?"

"He's a good Chinese," Slow said, "and fair's fair."

The Judge agreed. "That's right! It's only fair for the accused to have a lawyer, if any galoot wants the job."

"All right," Slow drawled. "Now, Tom, stiffen your backbone and answer plain. Did you wash that gold yourself?"

Old Tom stood up straighter between his guards. He folded his hands, thumbs together, over his faded shirt and blinked slit eyes. "Garden dirt," he mumbled. "Washee washee, long time."

"And how about the knife?"

"Cuttee *pe-tsai*, China cabbage."

Slow puffed at his pipe. "There you are, boys! Old feller's been working like a dog, panning out dirt that nobody else would bother with. Hell! If he'd robbed sluice-boxes, he'd have took more dust than that little bitty poke, wouldn't he? As for the cabbage-cutter—I've seen him cutting greens. We all have."

LISTENING, the men had come to their senses. None of them had an answer. Until, surprisingly, Groody let out a yowl. He had gotten his breath back and had scrambled up.

"I say *not guilty!* Hasn't been proved he stole, not yet! It's no crime to own a knife, either. Lots of us have got 'em! So let him keep on raising garden truck for white men to eat!" Then Gib glanced sideways at Slow Price. "No hard feelings, Slow. I can take a joke."

Paddy Free added a word. "We'd all be worse off, wanting the China greens. My old woman biles 'em with a bit of sowbelly."

The vote was taken with hearty goodnature. After which Judge Tarbell announced, "It was all a damn-fool mistake. Tom Ling is free! Turn him loose, boys, and give back his stuff. Don't lay another hand on him without further cause. Amen!"

Everybody was happy but Lucius Tucket. He snarled at Slow, the creases showing deep and ugly in his narrow face. "You made a fool of me, hey? Don't come courtin' my niece no more, or I'll plug you!"

He swung on Groody. "And you can laugh, Gib! You're the only man who never lost any dust—who always has a rich clean-up! I been robbed, though, and I won't forget."

Gib snickered. "Maybe Tom *is* a thief, but it ain't proved—yet."

The boys slapped Tom Ling on the back, each with a friendly word. "Raise me some Chinese greens, old feller!" "Make mine a bunch of big white radishes!"

He winced and blinked, still confused.

Slow walked down the trail with him, just to see him safe. Soon the old man began to chuckle, realizing that the trouble was over. He had his poke of gold dust; he stuffed it into one sleeve and hugged it tight against his chest.

Safely in sight of his rickety shack, Slow left him and sauntered back up the trail.

A few miners had gone back to work, but most were loafing around the cabins, jawing each other. Some called out, "Hi, Slow! What do you make of this gold-robbing business?" "Reckon we got a damn' thief in camp?"

"Don't know," he told them. "A thin clean-up is natural now and then. Gold don't lay even in the ground."

"We follow the color," a scrub-whiskered man argued, "yet each of us has had a poor take, some time, when it ought to have been good."

"All except Gib," another put in. "He claims it's all foolishness, and our ground is spotty. Cuss it, his must be better than it looks!"

Slow sauntered on. He hoped to have a word with Dorrie. But when he reached the Tucket cabin, Luce was sitting on the log doorstep with a double shotgun cradled in his arms.

"Keep a-going!" he said with a scowl. "Don't hang around bothering my niece!"

Dorrie exclaimed from inside. "Why,

the idea! Slocum never bothered me in his life, and I want to thank him!"

She ran out past her uncle. Luce caught hold of her flowing calico dress and hauled her back, at the same time waving a full-cocked shotgun with his free hand.

The girl didn't struggle. She shook her head at Slow, motioning him to go on. He went, feeling sorry for her and considerably vexed at Luce. What could he do? He didn't want to start another family row; there'd been enough quarreling already.

He climbed the trail to the upper gulch, the creek foaming at his left, the rock wall bulging at his right. Just where the trail was narrowest, he came face to face with Gib Groody.

And what was Gib after, on this side of the water? His claim was on the other side.

It was easy to see what Groody was looking for. Yes, trouble! He held a knife in his scabby fist, a long, vicious sticker. "Told you I could take a joke," he grinned. "How about you?"

Slow didn't have a weapon on him. Of course he could turn and run, or jump into the creek.

HE DIDN'T do either. "Depends on the joke, Gib," he said. Stooping left, he picked up a round, water-worn boulder. "I ain't a knife fighter, but I'm pretty good at heaving rocks. How hard is your head?"

Groody looked at the stone. He stopped laughing, and some red came into his sallow, pocky face.

It was Slow's turn to laugh. "Your knife is as handy a tool as old Tom's. What are *you* aiming to cut? See anything green about me?"

Without another word Groody flung around and went stamping off.

Gib Groody was a changeable sort, Slow thought. First he'd spoken against Tom Ling, then for him; and now he had changed his mind about funning. Shotguns and knives! A fellow would have to go heeled all the time, if this kept up. . . .

Supper over, Slow Price was sloshing his tin dishes in the creek when he heard a whistle. Low and clear, it didn't sound like a man's whistle at all.

He moved quickly for once. He was up in a jiffy, wiping his wet hands on his jeans and striding toward the thicket behind his shack.

Dorrie was there, standing hidden amongst the bristly growth. She said, "I slipped away from Uncle Luce. You got Tom Ling off because I asked you, and I've got to thank you."

Slow shrugged. "I was sorry for him, too. Your uncle was barking up the wrong tree."

"I was sure of that! Old Tom is so gentle and obliging, and he brings me his best vegetables."

"Luce is always mad at something," Slow sighed.

"He's sick all the time," the girl explained. "His stomach pains make him mean."

Slow reached for her hand. "Can't you break loose from the old duffer and his belly-ache? Are you plumb obliged to slave for him, get jawed at and hauled around?"

She shook her head. "Oh, I can't leave Uncle. Without my cooking he'd have worse pains than ever. Maybe he'd die! He has been good. Paid for my bringing up and schooling, after the Injuns killed Pa and Ma."

"Look here, Missy!" Slow pulled at the buckskin string around his neck, pulled the little gold ring from under his shirt. "I'm still keeping this for you. When can I put it on your finger?"

Dorrie snatched her hand away. "Not now, Slocum. You'll have to keep it a while longer. Don't come looking for me —and I certainly mustn't come here again!"

She was gone with a swirl of calico.

While working the next day in his leisurely way, Slow did some thinking about waiting for Dorrie. He'd have to wait until Luce Tucket got healthier and better tempered, he supposed.

Well, he could be patient. He'd been

patient all through the discouragement and slim pickings at Blind Man's Bar.

He'd make a stake here in Glory Gulch, anyway; enough to get married on. He had really struck a pay streak. All he had to do was keep loading his flume—his long trough of hollowed logs—and creek-water would do the rest.

Then he thought of the gold thieving. A funny business! Almost every fellow in camp suspected he had been robbed, yet no one was sure! There'd been no sign around the sluices. The ground was always so tramped-up that no extra tracks would show.

He turned the water in, and bent over the loaded flume with his shovel. Suddenly something glinted, falling from his open shirt. He clapped a hand up. Too late!

The little gold ring plopped into the running water.

Ruefully Slow looked at what he held. Two ends of a frayed buckskin string. "I wore that too long!" he said.

He scooped for the ring with his shovel, pawed for it with his hands. No use. It was lost in the trough-load of sand and water.

"Don't matter," he shrugged. "I'll find it when I clean up tomorrow. It's a heavy bit, won't wash far. It'll be in the first box, sure."

But things don't always turn out as you expect. . . .

SLOW slept pretty soundly, as usual; but the ring was on his mind, and he kept dreaming. He would see it rolling through the flume, through water and sand, until it jumped out into the creek. Or it would turn into a nugget again, or break up into dust.

So he was up earlier than usual. Pulling on shirt, jeans and boots, he trotted down to his diggings.

He turned off the water. Shovel in hand, he watched it drain away. And then he flung down the shovel and ripped out an oath.

"God on the mountain!"

One look had told him, even in the half-light of dawn. Somebody—while he was dreaming—had turned off the water, emptied the first, richest box, and started the flow again. Of course the ring must have been in that box!

No mistake this time, no joke about it. He really had been robbed: Slow stood helplessly rubbing his brown-whiskered chin. He could wash more gold. Couldn't get another ring, though, this side of Sacramento. Not tooled as well, with his name and Dorrie's engraved inside it.

His thoughts jumped to Tom Ling, and jumped away. Who else, then? How to nail a thief among fifty-odd galoots?

Slow didn't get any further with his thinking. Not then. He heard a quick patter of feet, felt a clutch on his arm. Dorrie Tucket was there beside him.

She was bare-footed, with a blanket wrapped over her gingham nightgown. Her fair hair streamed over her shoulders, and the little freckles stood out like pepper on her pale cheeks.

"Come quick!" she panted. "Uncle is hurt—bad!"

He didn't ask any questions, or even wait to fetch his gun. Side by side the two ran down the trail, the man steadying the girl when her feet were bruised on the stones. In a few minutes they were bending over Lucius Tucket.

Luce was lying stretched beside his flume. Fully dressed, with his unfired shotgun across his boots legs. His clothes were sodden with the mountain dew, and it lay in drops on his face. A red trickle had crept down from his breast to soak into the gravel.

"Your uncle is gone," Slow breathed. "A knife done it."

Dorrie sank to her knees. "It's my fault!" she choked. "He didn't have a chance! Because, after he threatened you, I took the percussion caps off his gun. He must have come out to watch the flume, not noticing."

"Never mind," Slow tried to comfort her. "Luce was always too rambunctious with that blaster. How'd you know? Hear anything?"

"No! I woke up and didn't hear him

snoring. So I peeked in his bunk, and he was gone."

"Then you searched for him? Well, don't look at him any more; it will only worry you. Just slip on your shoes and kite down to Free's place. Send Paddy here. His wife will take care of you."

After she was gone, he scouted around. There was more light now, though everything was still quiet in the gulch.

The dead man had been lying there for some time, as the dew showed. He had been stabbed across the flume, Slow figured, after he had surprised the robber in the dark, and tried to shoot him point-blank. The robber had grabbed the gun barrel with one hand—the metal was smudged—and had reached over the log trough with his knife.

The creek bank was pebbled here; it didn't hold footprints. Only one sludgy spot showed a half-round mark. "Bottom of a bucket," Slow nodded. "Sure, he would have his bucket along, to tote the loot. The sneaking hound dropped it here."

But when he investigated the sluice-boxes, he found that they had not been disturbed. They still held the heavy washings.

"Didn't dare linger," Slow guessed, "after usin' the sticker. Yet he was out for a haul, so he sneaked up to my diggings."

Nothing more to be done just then. Slow lit his pipe and squatted on his heels beside the dead man. Poor, crotchety Luce! He wouldn't be mean to his niece, or anybody else, ever again.

Queer that such a small, thin hole could let out a life! There were plenty of knives in camp; not so many to fit the wound. "Bet I know which!" Slow told himself. "Only I'll have to do some more figuring."

DAWN brightened into daylight, and the gulch began to wake up. The smoke of breakfast fires rose here and there. Slow had waited a long time, it seemed, before an Irish whoop sounded from down the trail and Paddy Free trotted into sight.

"I left the colleen with my woman!" he shouted. "And I rousted out the Judge!"

He was the first of a crowd. The news had spread, the excitement drew those who hadn't heard it. Men trailed from up and down the gulch. They crossed the creek, jumping from stone to stone. Tarbell arrived, pulling his gray goatee and fingering his pistols.

Gib Groody was the last, but he was the noisiest. "I was wrong!" he bawled. "We was all wrong about the Chinese devil!"

"Go easy!" Tarbell admonished.

Gib yelled louder. "Certain sure, it was the Chinese! He was mad at Luce, on account of being lugged to Court. They're revengeful, Chinese are. Cabbage cutter, hey? He cut cabbage for Luce, all right!"

Slow did his best. "Be sensible, boys! This wasn't revenge, it was looting, and Tom's knife ain't the only one—"

They wouldn't listen. "What are we waiting for?" Gib yowled. "Let's go get that pigtailed varmint!"

Answers came. "That's the talk!" "Now you're preachin'!" In a minute the crowd had turned into a mob. It was streaming down the trail, angry and roaring, paying no heed to the Judge's orders.

"Hold your horses!" Tarbell was shouting. "Don't go off half-cocked! We got to do things regular! Even a Chinaman ought to have a chance!"

A Chinaman's chance. Slow knew what that would be.

He tried to get in front of the gang. Sometimes he waded in the creek, sometimes he jumped over ditches. Of course a Chinese more or less didn't matter. But this wasn't just any Chinese; he was a decent old fellow who brought his best vegetables to Dorrie Tucket.

Hard as he tried, Slow couldn't get ahead. The first men reached Tom's patched-up shack and tore the door off its leather hinges. The doorway was too narrow for all who wanted to go in, so

they pulled out the whole front wall. Then they were inside, outside and all over.

Slow expected to see them nab old Tom like a bunch of terriers chewing a rat. Instead he heard them yell and swear.

"Ain't here, by the blazin' hell!" "The yellow scut has scooted!" "He's clean gone, black-damn his gizzard!"

It was so. When Slow looked into the trampled, ruined interior, he saw Tom's empty bunk and scattered, tattered blankets. A painted joss upset in a corner. A few pitiful bits of clothing strewed around. But Tom had vanished, with his gold-dust and cabbage knife.

"Looks bad," Tarbell rumbled. "I'm glad he got away, but running makes him look guilty."

Slow spat disgustedly. "Or level-headed! He could hear this bunch on the tear, a mile away. He'd remember the other time, wouldn't he?"

The searchers were at a loss. They tramped over Tom's garden patch, hunting for signs. They poked through the brush and rocks. A few started down the trail. Others gazed up at the steep, pine-grown walls of the gulch and scratched their heads.

"Can't be far," they argued. "Let's spread out!" "Sho, he's hightailed into the mountains." "Or lit out for the flats." "Maybe he's been legging it all night!"

"Keep it up!" Groody yawped. "A Chinese can hide like a snake!"

Slow lit his pipe, to help him think. One thing stuck in his mind. Why had Gib changed his tune, at the Miners' Court, *as soon as he heard the charge*?

He blew out a lungful of smoke, and suddenly the answer came: "Why, to keep Tom in camp. If Tom was under suspicion already, he'd be handy to take the blame for anything."

NOW it was all clear! He drew Tarbell aside and beckoned to Paddy. "Here's something you don't know," he told them. "Luce wasn't robbed last night, but I was. The same blatherskite must have done both jobs."

He paused to puff smoke. "Say, how'd a sluice-robber finish washing his loot? Would he hand-pan it, with fellers likely watching for just such work? No, sir, he'd simply chuck the stuff into his own sluice-box, if he had one. Then nobody could say it didn't get there natural."

The Judge tugged his goatee. "Couldn't, and that's a fact!"

"Well, in this case," Slow chuckled, "it's different." He drew the two closer and finished in a whisper.

Tarbell nodded solemnly, his hands dropping to his guns. Paddy started to hurroo, then clapped a broad palm over his mouth.

Slow had another question. "What man, besides Tom, packs a knife? A long, slim-jimmy one that never cut no cabbage? What man always cleans up rich, no matter what?"

The Judge strode up the trail. Slow lounged beside him, not seeming to hurry but keeping up. Paddy came a step behind.

Seeing them start off so purposefully, some of the miners sang out. "Hey, Judge, where are you bound? Know anything new?"

Receiving no answer, they followed the three. More and more trailed behind, until the whole gang was on the move—through the main gulch, up the rocky path to the upper gulch.

The three came to the stepping stones and crossed the creek. The others trooped after, curious and clamoring. Some slipped off the rocks in the excitement, and scrambled out of the riffles, soaked and swearing.

Groody overtook the leaders as they reached his diggings. "Holy hell!" he panted. "You don't suppose the Chinese is holed up in my shack? Just because I stood up for him once?"

They halted, waited for the last of the miners to come up and form a gaping, questioning half-circle. Then Tarbell lifted a hand for silence.

It was Slow who spoke. "We ain't interested in your shack, Gib, but in your flume." He looked at the log trough,

full of flowing water. "It's about time you cleaned up, ain't it?"

Groody looked at it, too. "No," he said. "No, I aim to let her run until tomorrow."

"Clean up now!" Tarbell boomed. "As a favor to me and all of us. We're right anxious to see the dust you boast about."

Gib glanced around at the crowd. All the men were still now, intent. Their eyes were on him, staring steadily.

"Oh, all right," he said. "Ye'll see some good stuff, boys." He moved around, seemingly unconcerned, and turned off the flow.

The flume emptied, the water drained away. The crowd pushed closer. Every one could see that the sluice-boxes were well loaded, that yellow specks shone amongst the wet gravel.

"Stand back!" Tarbell ordered. He stooped and pawed through the first, fullest box. Minutes passed, minutes of strained silence. Slow glanced at Groody; his blotchy face was puzzled, not frightened.

He didn't know what was coming until Tarbell stood erect, holding something up in his hand—Something small, round and gleaming. "What's this, boys?" Tarbell asked. "Do any of you recognize it?"

One fellow whistled. "A finger ring! By thunder, it looks like Slow's ring!" Others chimed in. "His sweethearting ring, that he tries to keep hid, but it hangs out of his shirt! How in tarnation did it get there?"

"It's Slow's ring," Tarbell affirmed, "sure enough. With his name and a certain lady's inside it. I'll tell you how it got here."

He cleared his throat. "Last night Slow was robbed, right after Luce Tucket was knifed, and probably by the same scoundrel. Well, boys, it seems that yesterday Slow'd had a mischance—dropped his ring spang into his bung-full flume. He meant to find it today, but meantime the damned robber cleaned his box, ring and all! So it wasn't found until right now!"

THE quiet lasted for a few moments more, the miners all standing stock-still and staring at the ring. A low, savage-sounding mutter rose as they began to understand.

The Judge turned half around, his free hand out. "Let's see that knife of yours, Gib."

But Gib Groody wasn't there! He had backed off while every eye was on the ring, had reached his cabin. They heard the door slam.

There was noise enough then. Movement enough. The miners swarmed at the cabin, yelling their lungs out. But a gun-barrel poked through a small window. It banged heavily, belching smoke and buckshot.

Two charging men went down. Another rolled over and sat up, grabbing at his shoulder. A fourth hopped back, cursing, on one leg.

Groody's voice came muffled from the shack. "Got another barrel!"

The crew scattered. Only the Judge was armed; the rest had been in too much of a hurry when they learned of Tucket's murder. Now two dozen angry fellows ran for the ford, to fetch their rifles, shotguns and pistols. The others took shelter along the creek-bank.

Slow had helped to drag back the wounded. They would do for a while. He hunkered by the creek and squinted over at the cabin. It was built of stout logs, all except the roof. That was only stretched canvas.

"No good getting worked up," Tarbell was saying. "He's cornered."

"Wait for the boys," a black-bearded miner growled. "We'll blow that shebang to bits!"

There it was again. Fifty crazy-mad men against one. Of course Groody was a different sort than old Tom; and he'd raised the very mob that was after him. Yet Slow felt his stomach heave, just the same.

"Lend me one of your guns, Judge," he said. "Let me go after him, just me. Give the yahoo his chance."

"Chance?" Tarbell wondered. "After robbing, killing, and trying to blame the Chinese? He don't deserve none!"

"A Chinaman's chance," Slow grinned. "That's what he deserves, and what he'll get."

He took the big revolver and crawled away. Out of line from the window, he made for the back of the cabin. Tarbell would be watching the front. Groody would stay at his one window. Of that, Slow was certain.

Slow straightened up at the rear corner of the shack. It would be easy enough, he figured. He'd climb up the notched logs and tear the canvas roof loose. Get the drop on Gib from behind, make him surrender. Then maybe the boys would calm down. There'd be a recent trail and hanging, instead of a wild and blood-lusting mobbing.

He had miscalculated! As he looked up at the slanting tent-cloth, he saw a knife cut through it from below. A long, thin blade, slashing widely. Next moment Gib Groody's sallow, scabby face came up through the cut, followed by the rest of him.

Gib didn't look right or left. He had dropped the knife and pulled a belt-gun. He slung both legs over the top log and slid to the ground. Keeping the cabin behind him, he started for the timbered ridge.

Nothing else for it! Slow let him run a few yards, then stepped out a pace and called softly, "Gib!"

Groody stopped in his tracks, whirled around and fired.

Slow crouched a little, feeling the hat whipped off his head. He had his pistol cocked and aimed already. All he had to do was squeeze the trigger.

Gib fired again, the lead flying wild. He turned to run on; but instead, he slumped down slowly, as if tired of it all. . . .

So everything had been fixed up. Everybody was satisfied. A job or two remained; the burying, and to divide the robber's gold among the robbed. No hurry now, though.

Slow had his own business. "I'm glad to get my ring back," he sighed. "Reckon I'll be needing it soon."

Judge Tarbell was cleaning his gun. "First a funeral, then a wedding," he said. "That's life! We'll give Luce a high-grade planting, anyway, head-board and all."

"One thing has me bothered," Slow admitted. "What happened to Tom Ling? Was he scared clean to Tophet and back again?"

Paddy Free laughed. "I'll ease your mind, my bucko. When the girl came for me this morning, she didn't come direct. No, by the powers! She run and fetched the Chinese first. 'Paddy,' says she, 'I know they'll be after poor Tom again. We must hide him away where he's safe!"

"My Mary agreed. And that's why the spalpeen is safe in my shanty, stowed under a bunk!"

THE COUNT OF MOUNTY CRISCO

CHAPTER I

Ketchup on the Vine

UP THE twisty coast road two weary riders jogged. To their left, at the foot of a bluff, the Pacific surf was busy pounding flat a strip of sandy beach Rising steeply to the right of them loomed the dry Santa Ynez Range, baked brown after the long, rainless California summer.

Somewhere on the backside of those coast mountains lay Cuyama Ranch. There "Swap" Bootle and "Whopper" Whaley were headed.

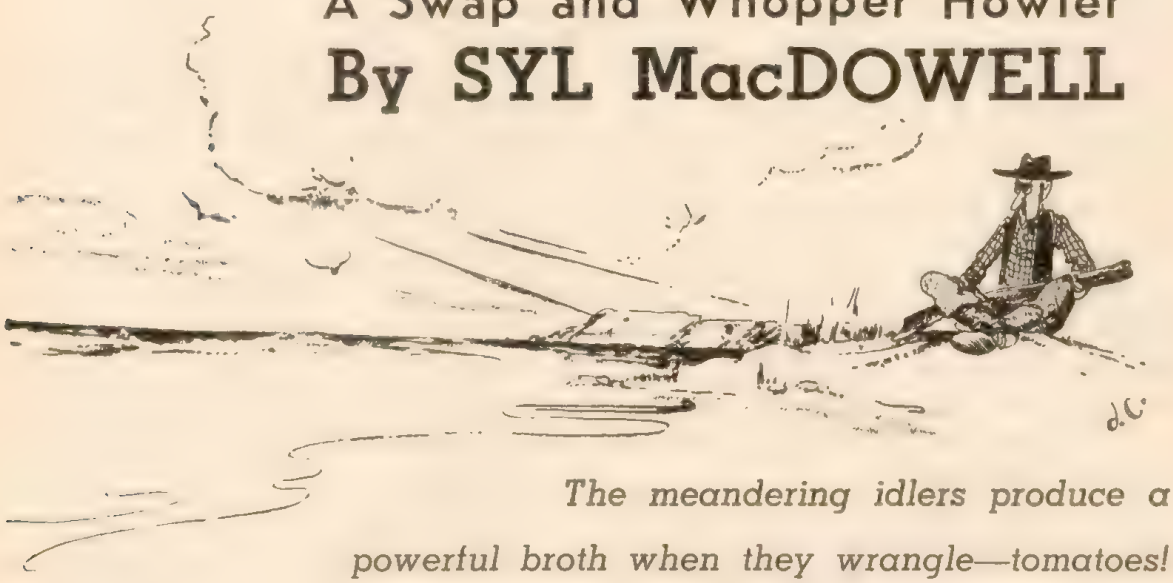
It was fall roundup time yonder, in the cattle country. Experienced punchers were needed. Swap and Whopper were old-time tophands, but they had no intention of going to work on the Cuyama, or anywhere else. They were job-dodgers.

What attracted them was the free barbecue, an annual event on the old, historic spread. The big outdoor feed usually lasted for three or four days, which made it mighty important to a pair of broke and hungry saddle bums like Swap and Whopper.

The pardners didn't talk much as they rode. Spray lifted from the long line of surf, giving a salty tang to the air. Gulls wheeled, maneuvering along the shore on motionless wings and eyeing the travelers curiously. A ground squirrel scampered across the road in front of them and ran to the top of a fencepost, scolding as they passed. A wisp of blackbirds came from somewhere, lighted on an electric wire, and sized up the vicinity for a night's roosting place.

A Swap and Whopper Howler

By SYL MacDOWELL



The meandering idlers produce a powerful broth when they wrangle—tomatoes!

Swap had something of the same sort in mind, because it was almost sunset. So he spoke up.

"About time to make camp, ain't it, Whopper?"

His leggy, long-nosed pardner grunted agreement.

"Trouble is," complained the little, round-faced Swap, as he pointed to a warning poster on the ground squirrel's fencepost, "it says 'no campfires' all along here. That means a cold supper."

Whopper shifted a quid of plugcut from one sunken, grizzled cheek to the other. He gazed ahead, to a detour sign where a road construction crew had left a partly-repaired culvert.

"There's ways to hotten up grub without a campfire," he said.

Swap turned a puzzled blink on him. "How?" he demanded.

Whopper squirted a jet of plugcut juice over one skinny shoulder.

"It's plumb simple. For a deep thinker, like me."

Swap was vaguely alarmed by that reply.

"Look here now, Whopper Whaley," he said severely, "don't start another one o' yore loco experiments!"

There were times, he had learned, when Whopper imagined himself to be an inventor. His outlandish schemes and contraptions generally wound up disastrously. That was Whopper's trouble, a runaway imagination, that and his gift of gab that combined to make him a terrific liar.

WHOPPER ignored Swap's protest. He bore himself with a superior

dignity as he went past the detour sign and to the dug-up culvert. Around the excavation were several smudgy flarepots, giving off oily flame to warn night travelers.

Whopper pointed a bony finger at the flarepots.

"There yuh are, pardner. We'll just use one of them dinguses for a cookin' fire, savvy? It's simple, like I said."

Swap looked a little sheepish.

"Okay, then, yuh solved that problem. Here's a tougher one. What're we going to have for supper?"

Whopper squinted meditatively over the smooth, shiny expanse of ocean. The lowering sun already was painting the horizon a glowing pink. That warmly tinted sky gave him another idea.

"How about a can of tomater soup?" he suggested.

"Soup!" sputtered Swap. "That's starvation grub! Me, I downright hate canned soup! And the thinnest kind is tomato soup!"

"Not when yuh richen it up with ketchup," Whopper said.

"Ketchup? How d'yuh figger on gittin' hold of any ketchup around here?"

"Already got ahold of a bottle," Whopper announced complacently. "How? Bought it yestiddy, with our last thirty cents."

"Yuh mean tuh say yuh blew in our entire capital on a bottle of ketchup?" squawked Swap.

"Yup, that's right," Whopper nodded. "Ketchup goes with almost anything yuh put it on. It goes good straight, even. I'm mighty fond of ketchup. Like it better'n any sweet larrup."

Swap already knew that. Whopper was in the habit of drowning almost everything he ate in ketchup—when he had it. The trouble now was having something to go with the ketchup, something besides tomato soup. Until, that is, they reached the free barbecue at Cuvama Ranch.

"Well, too late to holler about it now," sighed Swap, peeling off his horse, a fancy two-toned bay-sorrel, almost as freakish as Whopper's cheese-colored roan.

Whopper pried himself out of saddle, too. They unloaded their saddle packs and made simple preparations to spend the night. They spread their soogans under the culvert, opened the can of tomato soup and Whopper, smugly pleased with his ready ingenuity, held the can over one of the flarepots with a pair of pliers gripping the lid.

When it was steaming languidly, he divided the lean fare more or less evenly into tin cups, then dug into their pack for the ketchup. Soon he was slugging up his ration of soup by thumping the ketchup bottle on the bottom with a palm.

"It either don't pour or else sloshes out all at once," he complained mildly. "Someday I aim to invent a better way of puttin' up ketchup. In one of these here squeeze tubes, for instance, like shavin' cream or tooth paste."

They soon finished their slim repast. Still hungry, Whopper nipped off a hunk of plugcut and ambled off for a look around. Often in times past they had foraged for food, as the horses were doing now along the fence line.

Whopper gazed across the fence into the field beyond. Something was growing there, or had been, on the mesa bench that sloped to the beach bluff. Whatever it was, it was hard to see because it was dusk now.

He crawled through the fence, stepped into the field, and scrooched down to examine a row of small, ground-hugging plants. He saw, then, that they were heavily loaded with small, round, red things.

He plucked one. His long jaw sagged.

"Goshlemity!" he gusted. "Tomaters!"

Suddenly he was aware of somebody standing close beside him. He looked up quickly to see a gangly, snipe-faced man watching him intently.

"And so they be," the man grated in a rusty-sounding voice. "Ripe, juicy and going to waste, all because I can't hire nobody to coom pick them. Pairhaps you and the wee little mon yonder wud be willin' to accept sooch employment?"

Whopper dropped the one he had picked and jacked himself to his feet.

"W-we ain't a-lookin' for work, no sir!" he gabbled hastily.

THE snipe-faced man wagged his head regretfully. "Hm-mm. Thot's too bad. Sooch bein' the case, it's my onpleasant dooty to order ye arrested."

"Arrested?" yawped Whopper. "Wh-what for?"

"For trespassin'."

Whopper, pale and scared, lurched to the fence and steadied himself against it. He felt like a trapped animal.

"Y-yuh mean, I either got to go to work or go to jail?"

"Aye, thot's it."

If ever there was a situation that called for fast talk, this was it, Whopper decided.

"Hold on now, f-friend," he stammered, "I didn't rustle no tomaters." With desperate afterthought, he added: "I—I was just inspectin' 'em, that's all."

The snipe-faced man's sly expression changed.

"Oho, so ye be an inspector, eh?"

Whopper clutched at that straw. "Yes-sir, that's correct, friend!" he lied breathlessly.

The other's face was narrowly suspicious.

"County, state or goovernment?" he asked.

Whopper was on thin ice and knew it. To pose as a public official might get him into deeper difficulties. He hesitated, as his thoughts groped desperately for a safe answer to that pointed question. It was a crisis that had to be met. His talent for tall talk came to the rescue. He inflated himself with a deep breath and poked out his skinny chest importantly.

"Me, I'm Perfessor Whaley," he announced glibly. "The famous ketchup expert. That's how come I'm mighty interested in tomaters."

The snipe-faced man perked up with eager interest.

"That's vurra, vurra interestin'," he enthused, rubbing his hands together. "And what hae ye obsairved, Professor?"

Whopper had ahold of himself now. He cocked a jaunty elbow on a fence post and stated impressively:

"What yuh've got here, friend, is the finest ketchup crop I ever seen anywhere. The question is, how to harvest it."

"Aye, that's it. How?"

Whopper rubbed his stubbly jaw, trying to look seriously thoughtful. After a suitable pause, he came out with a reckless promise.

"I'll put my brains to work on that, friend. I'll figger out sumthin'. But I better sleep on it."

"Vurra good," agreed the snipe-faced man. "Thank ye kindly, professor. I'll be aboot airly in tha mornin'."

With that he turned and legged it off across the field in the deepening dusk. Whopper drew a deep, thankful breath. Then he crawled back through the fence and returned to camp. He squirmed under the culvert, sat on his spread-out soogans and started to pull off his boots.

Swap, back from changing the horses to fresh grazing, remarked with mild surprise:

"Ain't it sort of soon to turn in?"

"Nope. Not if we make a early start from this vicinity in the mornin', pardner. Plenty early, pardner. Earlier the better."

CHAPTER II

The Laird of Fogrock

WHOPPER opened one eye at gray daybreak, but he didn't get up. Being lazy and a born putter-offer, he rolled over for a short, snug snooze. When he wakened again it was from a dream, a disturbing dream in which he seemed to be swimming in a sea of ketchup.

He yawned, stretched. The mist-reddened sun was topping the sharply notched crest of the Santa Ynez Range. Then his eyes popped wide open as he saw a pair of legs dangling over the edge of the culvert.

They obstructed the opening with the unpleasant suggestion of bars across a jail window.

Recognizing those plow-booted legs as belonging to the snipe-faced tomato grower, he sat up and made a grab for his own footgear. As he did so, his persistent, undesired acquaintance of the night before dropped from the culvert and eyed him with stern disapproval.

"Ye nigh slept away tha forenoon," he complained.

"H-howdy, friend," Whopper greeted blearily. He had that trapped feeling

SWAP

again. "I been busy rasslin' with yore ketchup problem."

"What coom of it?"

Whopper groped for a safe answer.

"Well, it won't pay to pick them tomaters by hand," he decided.

"Pairhaps ye know some better way, eh?"

Swap, who was awake now, was completely befuddled by the conversation. Whopper tried to divert the tomato man's attention.

"This here is my—my assistant, Mister Bootle," he introduced. "I didn't catch yore name, friend."

"McClabber. Skimpy McClabber. As we were sayin'—"

"What's this palaver about ketchup?" blurted Swap. "I hope you ain't gone and got more ketchup, Whopper Whaley!"

"Goshlemity, no. Mister McClabber, here, he's on the lookout for some labor-savin' device to harvest a ketchup crop, that's all."

Swap uttered a dull groan.

"Don't tell me yuh're hatchin' out another one of yore inventions!"

Whopper stood up and stomped his feet firmly into his worn, runover boots. He reached for his plugcut.

"We kin talk it over after breakfast," he said evasively. "Back down the road a piece, about five miles, I see a eatin' place. Let's——"

"It's better ye eat at my place," interrupted Skimpy McClabber, still blocking the exit from the culvert.

"Plumb delighted to accept yore kind invitation, friend," beamed Whopper, with a quick wink at his bewildered little pardner. "How about saddlin' up the hosses, Swap?"

"The odd beasties already be guests o' Fogrock Ranch," announced the crafty McClabber. "I took the liberty o' corralin' them a gude half-hour ago."

That didn't sound like hospitality. What was this canny porridge-blower—host or captor? Whopper felt they were more prisoners than guests. This scheming, snipe-faced person had suspected his intention to skip and had shrewdly prevented it by this early-bird maneuver.

There was nothing to do but make the best of it—for the present, anyhow. Swap and Whopper rolled up their blankets, gathered their few simple belongings and broke camp. Near the culvert stood a rickety pick-up truck. At McClabber's direction, they piled their gear into the back of it, perched on the tailgate and started.

HOW this had all happened was still a mystery to Swap. But the racket of the pickup in motion made it impossible for him to question his pardner without shouting so loudly that McClabber would overhear.

The road, after a short distance, dipped and twisted into the mouth of a canyon

that opened onto the beach. In this picturesque but cheerless setting they beheld Fogrock Ranch.

The setting might have been some dismal glen and moor on the coast of Scotland. There was the muffled roar of pounding surf and a bone-chilling dampness that pervaded a clutter of weathered buildings and the weedy bottomland pasture beyond. On the far side of the pasture, under a grove of wind-twisted cypress beside a trickling creek, the pardners glimpsed the bay-sorrel and the cheese-colored roan. In the foreground grazed a herd of milk cows.

"Dairyin', 'tis a hard way for a mon to make a livin'," McClabber told them as he stopped the truck and got out of the battered cab.

"But a mighty good combination, that and growin' tomaters," said Whopper as he slid from the tailgate.

"Aye? How so?"

"Yuh got all the ingredients for makin' tomater soup."

It was a doomful suggestion, for Skimpy McClabber's retort was: "Thot's whut ye'll be havin' for breakfast, Professor."

In the dank, disordered house a lukewarm pot of dull red liquid sat on the back of a cracked wood stove. Swap rolled his eyes dolefully.

"Count me out, Mister McClabber."

"Na hoongry, eh?"

"Not for tomato soup."

"Mister Bootle, here, he's sort o' finicky," Whopper apologized.

Skimpy McClabber gave the little, round pardner a malicious leer.

"Hard work'll cure ye o' thot, Count of Mounty Crisco," he snickered. "It'll rid ye o' thot unbecoomin' fat."

The bare mention of toil dulled the edge of Whopper's appetite, too. So it didn't take long for him to dispense with the scant handout. Having done so, he nipped a supply of vitamins from his slab of plug-cut and roamed restlessly outside.

He pretended an interested inspection of the ranch premises, but his purpose was to explore for some quick and handy way to reach the horses. The prospect was discouraging. The pasture was enclosed by a railing fence, and the board gate was padlocked.

He continued his melancholy survey, and having an eye for such things, saw that Fogrock Ranch was equipped with a mechanical milking apparatus, sterilizing tank, bottling machine and other labor-saving contrivances which hinted that Skimpy McClabber wasn't one to hire paid help.

The laird of Fogrock was getting impatient. He interrupted Whopper's idle stroll by bursting out with:

WHOPPER

"Time's a-wastin', Professor. I'm waitin' to hear whut ye promised to tell."

That jarred Whopper's memory of the night before, of his airy assurance that he would devise some way of harvesting the ketchup crop.

It was a tough order and a strain even on an imagination as powerful as his. He sat on a milk can, crossed his long legs, propped a ragged elbow on a patched knee and cupped his cactusy jaw in a hand and got busy thinking. The dreamy look in his eyes as he gazed through the pasture fence filled Swap with nervous foreboding. Whopper was cooking up something. His eyes weren't on the horses. They were on no material object. They gazed beyond the realm of substance and reality to the other side of mortal existence.

It was a bad sign, a sign that Whopper was doping out another "invention." He was shaping, in his mind, one of his weird contraptions that seldom ever worked. He was in a trance and when he came out of it, his latest hot-air castle would take root on Fogrock Ranch.

What then? The outcome was unguessable, except for one thing: their cold war relations with Skimpy McClabber would end in a hot time for them.

Whopper's empty gaze straved to a stack of metal just inside the pasture gate and clung there, magnetlike. It was a stack of galvanized trough sections, each one foot or so in diameter and about twelve feet long.

Whopper pointed a long finger at them. "What yuh use them for, friend?" he droned.

"Ta build a flume fr-rom the creek when the pasture's in need o' irrigation," McClabber told him.

"Well, I reckon they'll do."

"Do for whut?"

"They'll make a gravity conveyor, leadin' down from yore ketchup patch."

SKIMPY McCLABBER scratched the back of his long, scraggly head. "I na oonderstand, mon," he croaked irritably.

Whopper spat expertly between two fence railings. He stood up, yanked his pants higher around his stringy middle and faced the other with lofty superiority. Whopper was good at that kind of thing. Swap grudgingly admired the front he managed to put up, knowing how little he had in back of it.

"Goshlemity, ain't it simple enough?" Whopper exclaimed condescendingly. "I got it all figgered out already!"

"Coom to tha point, mon!" McClabber snapped, looking annoyed.

Swap shied away to a good dodging place at a corner of the milking barn. Fate's fuse was lit and sizzling. Only a matter of time now and the blow-up would come. But he paused there to listen in shuddery fascination as Whopper rattled off:

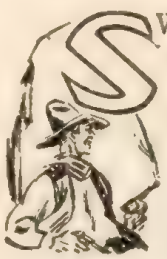
"All yuh got to do, friend, is set up there in the field and drop tomaters in the trough. They'll roll down here and drop in the pasteurizer tank. The whirligig thing'll squash 'em and bring 'em to a quick boil. Then the juice, it'll spill over into the bottlin' machine. And there yuh have it!"

"Hae what?" McClabber asked dazedly.

"Bottled ketchup! Yessir, a automatic ketchup ranch, runnin' full blast without no hired help! No pickers, no pay roll! Goshlemity, Mister McClabber, yuh've got the ketchup industry by the tail and with a downhill roll! Yuh'll be rich in no time!"

CHAPTER III

Red River



SWAP'S fright-glazed eyes were glued on Skimpy McClabber. How would he react to such blithering nonsense? Some men exploded immediately when Whopper explained one of his lame-brained inventions. Others . . .

This miserly McClabber character, Swap was flabbergasted to behold, was evidently one of the others. How a man of his hard, practical nature could be suckered by such a hoax was hard to understand.

Maybe his grasping, saving nature explained it. Getting something for nothing, or its near equivalent, was a McClabber weakness.

Avaricious delight shone on his dour countenance. He rubbed his horny hands together and gave a throaty chuckle. It grew into a gleeful cackle. He leaped in an ungainly antic intended to be a Highland fling.

"Hoot mon!" he shrilled. "Ye hae a head on your shoulders, I'm thinkin'!"

He clasped Whopper on the back with such hearty violence that his head was almost dislodged from its mooring.

"Let's be aboot it at once, eh?" the Scot demanded briskly.

"Shore thing," Whopper said agreeably.

"Me and Mister Bootle, we'll start right now layin' the flume line up to the tomaters." He added, as an afterthought: "That'll be hoss work, natcherally. For which we'll need our own cayuses."

"Of coorse!" agreed McClabber, hustling to the pasture gate, unlocking and swinging it open.

Swap bolted through and streaked for the bay-sorrel and the cheese-colored roan. He felt good again. His admiration for Whopper's talent at evasion and deceit rose high. In a roundabout way, Whopper had schemed to get the horses. The rest would be easy.

Back to the ranchyard, he quickly had them saddled and ready.

The two of them went at their chore cowboy-style. Shaking out their throw-ropes, they each lassoed a length of metal trough. Dragging them at rope-ends, they departed from the premises, out of the cove and up a hillside to the open field.

Once a safe distance out of earshot, Swap gusted: "That was a smart play, Whopper Whaley! Now whichaway shall we vamoose?"

Whopper reined the roan to a stop and eyed him queerly.

"Vamoose? For why, pardner?"

"B-before that Scotch highball catches on, of course!"

Whopper shifted his cud of plugcut from one cheek to the other.

"Now then, don't let's go off half-cocked, pardner. Me, I've been a-thinkin' some more."

"You thought up this crazy getaway stunt. Ain't that enough?" chittered Swap.

" 'Tain't crazy, pardner," Whopper stated, wagging his head. "And it ain't a getaway stunt."

"Th-then what is it?" wailed Swap. "Don't tell me you—"

"It's the smartest invention I ever thought up, that's what it is."

"But yore inventions never work! Remember the gravy cannery yuh promoted? And the dollar-bill tree? And the time yuh burned down a farmer's barn with a fool hay dryer?"

"Them was only experiments. This here is different. One of my inventions is bound to turn out right, and this is it."

SWAP clasped his agonized brow. Whopper could be strangely stubborn sometimes. The panicky little pardner played his trump card.

"Yuh fergot about the free barbecue at Cuyama?" he pleaded.

"Wait'll ketchup gits to running. Then we won't need free eats no more."

"Yuh expect to live on ketchup?"

"I figger on makin' a dicker with Mister McClabber."

"That soup-suckin' skinflint? He'll rob yuh of yore eyeteeth!"

Whopper gave a confident, gap-toothed grin.

"I shed my eyeteeth a long time back, pardner. Now just keep yore shirt on. I'll be the master mind of the ketchup industry. So let's dangle back and git another drag-load of this here tomater racetrack."

There was no talking him out of it. Whopper was such a fluent liar that he believed himself. Swap flapped his arms in despair and resigned himself to the inevitable. If tomato soup was to be their regular diet, the quicker the blowup came the better.

Dragging and laying the sections of metal trough wasn't much of a strain on their lazy sinews. While they did that, Skimpy McClabber got set for a red river down at the dairy. He stoked a fire under the boiler for a head of steam. He adjusted the pasteurizer for the new demands to be made on it.

"She's aboot ready," he announced eagerly, when the flume was in place. "Now get the tomatoes to rollin' lads."

Swap turned to Whopper in helpless dismay.

"See? Just like I expected! We got to work!"

Bare mention of work usually stampeded Whopper, but now he calmly fanged off a fresh chew of plugcut.

"We got to demonstrate the Whaley ketchup harvester, don't we? Goshlemity, pickin' a few tomaters to git it started

ought to be a pleasure, pardner."

Swap weakened. By now he had developed a morbid curiosity to see what was going to happen.

When they rode back to the field, a crew of highway workers had started their day's work on the culvert job. Dump trucks were bringing rock and gravel to fill the approaches. The tomato trough lay close to the project. Swap and Whopper descended from saddle and went to picking tomatoes, tossing the ripe, red fruit into the flume.

The law of gravity did the rest. Down it went in leaps and bounds to the processing plant. It was fun to watch. The road crew took an amused interest. One of the truckers rubbered curiously as he backed to dump his load.

That momentary inattention to his own job produced a mishap. The dual hind wheels slued into a soft bank. The truck tilted ponderously. With a yell, the driver leaped clear. The load of coarse gravel shifted and rumbled beyond the fill and out onto the field.

Swap and Whopper skittered out of the path of the deluge in the nick of time. Fist-sized stones bounced, banged at the metal trough and poured into it. In the next moment, a river of ruinous rock was rattling down the long incline.

The dump truck completed the havoc by capsizing and rolling. It lodged mightily against an electric pole, which snapped like a matchstick. The wires snapped and dropped, with a fluttering and chirping of blackbirds that had been interested spectators of the confusion.

The falling pole whanged down across the tomato chute, putting it out of use. But too late. Rocky rubble danced down on Fogrock Ranch.

But the pole's damage flashed an idea to Swap. With swift presence of mind he leaped to leather. If they could spurt on ahead of the torrent of road ballast and break the flume line . . .

"C'mon, Whopper!" he shrieked above the clattering din. "Ride for it! Only one way to shut it off!"

He needled the bay-sorrel into a scampering run. Whopper tootled after him on the cheese-colored roan. It was a strange race—men against a miniature rockslide.

They made a heroic dash that took them to the last, sharp descent into the cove. Aghast, they reared to a stop. They had lost. Shocked speechless, they could only stare at the impending disaster.

Providentially Skimpy McClabber had been forewarned by the break in the electric power line that supplied current to his dairy appliances. With the abrupt failure, he poked his head out of the pasteurizer shed. He heard the whanging, nearing tumult. He saw a river of tomatoes that had turned to a flood of rock. On the crest he also beheld the gaping pardners.

McClabber of Fogrock was a man of quick suspicion. Putting two and two together, his suspicion flared into fierce certainty. He was certain that those homeless, horsy hoboes had played a monstrous trick on him, that they had plotted his destruction.

Roaring with righteous wrath, he charged for them. The toe of his plowboot caught on the flume. He tripped and floundered flat in the ranchyard dust.

The accident served a useful purpose. It dislodged that section of trough, just as the flow of tomatoes ended and a punishing missiles of rock began.

The disconnection saved his dairy machinery. But rock bombarded the building with deafening clamor. McClabber, scrambling to regain his feet, was caught in the bombardment. A good-sized part of the truckload, rebounding like gigantic hailstones, pelted him, downed him and covered him.

Swap pressed a hand over his eyes. Whopper turned sickly white under his leathery tan. Surely no man could survive such a pounding.

But they did not reckon on the tough McClabber tissues. Nor did they realize that the drubbing had been cushioned by a preliminary potpourri of tomatoes.

The rock heap that might well have been McClabber's burial monument stirred and tumbled. Out of it, as if being

resurrected on judgment day, rose McClabber.

Swap peeked through his fingers. What he saw made him squeeze his eyes shut. Whopper, with a convulsive gulp that downed his chew of plugcut, swayed and clutched his saddle horn as a spell of faintness dizzied him. The stoutest heart would have trembled at that gruesome sight.

"G-goshlemity!" Whopper warbled. "He —he's all bloody from head tuh foot!"

There was no ignoring the fact that Skimpy McClabber oozed and dripped red from scraggly dome to thick-soled clodhoppers. Was it blood or the raw makings of bottled ketchup?

Swap and Whopper were not left long in tormenting doubt as to the seriousness of McClabber's injuries. He was bunged up but far from disabled. Raging with the ear-splitting clamor of a regiment of bagpipes, he scooped up a double handful of rocks and went into action.

CHAPTER IV

Tide of Terror

NOW sometimes a man armed with a gun can be reasoned width, delayed or even persuaded. A cudgel-swinging assailant can be dodged. A knife wielder is dangerous only at close quarters, and a fistic assault can easily be avoided if the intended victim has a horse under him.

But a rock thrower is bad medicine. Valor shrinks and courage fades, and a horse is only a hindrance in the face of such hostility.

Swap and Whopper didn't have to hold a council of war to reach accord on that. The only recourse was for man and beast to get the heck out of McClabber's way in the quickest time possible. The bay-sorrel and the cheese-colored roan were in unanimous agreement with their riders when a hurled missile cannonballed against the roan's ribs and rebounded, solidly conking the bay-sorrel.

In cat-quick unison, the horses whirled and high-tailed for the beach. Skimpy McClabber noisily pursued, his bagpipe battle cry rising to the volume of a circus calliope.

It wasn't far to the surf-lashed strand. There Swap and Whopper flung frantic looks up-coast and down. Which way to get quickly out of range?

To their consternation, neither direction offered a route for escape. A short distance to the south, waves battered a rugged headland that jutted into a deep, foam-flecked maelstrom. Hemming them in on the north was a rusty barbed wire fence. Though it reached only to the tideline, at that point it met a jagged upthrust where the surf churned and boiled in slippery masses of seaweed and a menacing barrier of razor-sharp barnacles and mussels. As for the bluff, here on the seaward side it was an almost vertical cliff that would have balked even a mountain goat.

As the pardners paused in confused indecision, McClabber darted into the ranch-house and almost immediately sallied out again, loading a double-barreled shotgun.

IT IS folly to argue with a shotgun. A man packing a rifle or a revolver thinks well of the grim finality of a well-aimed bullet. But a shotgun is a satisfying outlet for the homicidal urge. It inflicts punishment without lethal effects. A shotgun was just the thing Skimpy McClabber needed to express his feelings.

So he came on the run, breaking step only once to trigger a random shot that lifted a jet of stinging sand against the roan's belly.

The roan bucked. Whopper, clawing for leather, sailed from saddle and made a sensational landing on his face. He tried to burrow in the sand like a self-deluded ostrich.

Swap, believing his pardner mortally hit, squirrelled from leather and ran to him. The horses gallivanted back the way they had come.

McClabber squatted, fingered a fresh

load in the shotgun and sighted on the scrambling Whopper and the hunched Swap.

"Aha! Now I'll prickle ye're measly hides!" he screeched. "Up with ye and run fer it!"

There was only one way to go—and the pardners didn't need any advice from Horace Greeley. To the west lay the ocean, the broad Pacific that reached to the far Orient. The only landfall, so far as was visible, was a landmark from which Skimpy McClabber had taken the name for his ranch, Fogrock.

Fogrock was a rough, massive cone that rose sharply from the surging bosom of the sea, about seventy yards offshore. High and bare and forbidding it stood, with the swells booming against its base.

Here was their only refuge, this stern and forbidding hunk of dark basalt, frosted by sea birds that had long made it their rookery. It offered the only possible chance to escape McClabber's vengeance. Alcatraz would have looked inviting alongside Fogrock. On its lofty crest there was not a single shrub or a blade of grass. Like a lifeless peak on the moon it brooded in sea-swept solitude.

But solitude was just what Swap and Whopper needed. They got up and pranced straight into the glistening white fangs of the surf. Cold brine lapped about their shins, their knees, lashed about their thighs and middles as they waded on.

Providence had arranged one thing in their favor. It was low tide. So the reach of water between the beach and Fogrock was shallow, not quite swimming depth. But there was an interval of harrowing uncertainty as they were submerged to their necks. Then the firm, sandy bottom rose. They found foothold, clambered up and stood dripping and shivering on a ledge swept by a sharp, penetrating breeze. They were just a few feet above the rolling rise and fall of the sea, and birds of all sorts circled and screamed protest at the invasion. Gulls wheeled, voicing alarm and indignation. Ungainly cormorants took wing from desolate crags. A flock of pelicans sailed solemnly from their resting perches. A sea lion startled them with a throaty bark, challenging their presence. Crabs scuttled underfoot and other strange, wiggling, crawling things added to the rangeland wanderers' distress and agitation in their unfamiliar surroundings.

"G-goshlemity!" wheezed Whopper. "That was shore a close call!"

"Plain murder would of been a heap simpler" panted Swap. "Wh-why didn't Mister McClabber shoot when he had the chance?"

"He will yet, mebbe," Whopper said half-hopefully through chattering teeth.

Forlornly they gazed shoreward. McClabber, still squatting, had sighting on them along the brown rib of his trusty double-barrel. The shotgun butted his shoulder as he fired. A load of shot splattered in a long column across the water, but fell short.

"We're just about two whoops and a holler out of range," Swap complained, as though disappointed. "He's got us treed, so he'll just set there and gloat."

That was just what Skimpy McClabber settled down to do. Thriftily he abstained from further waste of ammunition. He crossed his legs, laid the shotgun across his lap and wiped the red smear from his face, exposing a ruthless, exultant grimace.

It was nearing noon. As the minutes dragged, the breeze freshened. Out beyond Fogrock whitecaps danced, and even the well larded little Swap turned blue with cold.

EXPOSURE sharpened Whopper's appetite, for all the discomfort and peril. He peered gloomily about him as he gnawed off a salty, soggy nubbin of plug-cut. He gandered down into a damp, forbidding crevice and saw a long, slimy shape with a pair of beady, malevolent eyes, something like Skimpy McClabber's, looking wickedly up at him.

"D'yuh th-think a man c-could manage to eat a raw eel, pardner?" he asked plaintively.

"Experiments is in yore line," Swap re-

torted heartlessly. "Go ahead and try it. It can't be any worse'n tomato soup."

How to capture the eel was the problem. There wasn't even a stick to poke at it with.

"If I only had a hank of haywire—" Whopper began, when a high, crested swell romped in, dashed against Fogrock and hurled a sheet of spray that drenched both pardners anew.

Before they recovered from that alarm, it happened again. In greater volume this time, a wave slapped, gurgled and boomed along the base of Fogrock, battering them with a wall of green water. The sound alone was terrifying.

"If this keeps up, Whopper, we'll git washed off of here!" spluttered Swap.

"Th-then we got to climb up higher!" whooshed Whopper.

He explored for some toehold by which they could rise from their precarious perch. He made a try, slipped and tumbled.

"Goshlemity, it—it looks like we're done for!" he whinnied as he rubbed a skinned elbow.

"Trapped like coupla rats!" moaned Swap.

If only somebody would show up and see their plight! Whopper stretched himself to his full height, gazing past the sinister, squatted McClabber, past the ranchhouse and to the area beyond. He saw their horses, dragging rein in the ranch yard. At the same time he noticed the milk herd, slowly bunching around the pasture gate.

Being cow-minded, Whopper understood what that meant. It was the habit of dairy cattle to head toward the milking barn when it was milking time. A tiny hope gleamed.

"Listen, Swap!" he rattled off excitedly. "Mister McClabber came to our camp mighty early, didn't he?"

"He shore did. And he let on that he'd been up quite a spell."

"Then he must of milked before daylight!"

"Yeah? What's that got to do with us?"

"It means them cows is due to git milked again purty pronto!"

Swap fingered water out of one ear. The idea seeped into his benumbed mind.

"Mebbe yuh're right, Whopper," he hoped.

"When he heads for the barn, that'll be our chance!"

"Yup. Then we kin swim for the beach."

That small hope made the ordeal of waiting more endurable. Stoically they braved the showering spray and increasing frequency of the attacking waves, clinging like limpets when their ledge went awash.

But little did the stray ex-punchers know about the ocean's tides. How high did the tide rise and for how long? But rising it was, that they knew with awful certainty. Shorter and shorter were the intervals when their ledge was exposed, streaming backwash from each passing, crested breaker.

"W-we can't hold out much longer!" chittered Swap, bracing himself for the next angry, swirling onslaught.

Whopper took one last desperate, long-necked gander in the direction where help would come from—if at all. He looked with the waning hope of a shipwrecked sailor gazing vainly for a passing ship. Then, in a weak, unnatural voice he piped out:

"Hoo-hooray!"

Swap looked landward. Up by the barn, he saw and recognized one of the highway workers, a man in soiled khaki and a red felt hat. The man stepped onto the running board of the McClabber pick-up truck, reached in and tooted the horn.

Their snipe-faced nemesis craned around. He pushed himself to his feet. He shook a fist in their direction, then trudged away to meet his visitor.

That gesture of dismissal was literally a stay of execution, a deliverance from certain doom. Whopper gnawed off a wet chew, his usual preliminary to taking a resolute step.

"Here goes," he said shakily, lowering himself crabwise from the watery ledge.

His plunge was hastened by a towering wave that engulfed them both, sweeping

them off Fogrock. The next they knew, they were paddling desperately for shore.

CHAPTER V

Milk and Money

A RUN of adversity always increased the pardners' appreciation of the return of life's simple blessings. They were grateful merely for being alive when a breaker washed them up on the beach. Wet, bedraggled and exhausted as they were, they turned joyful at setting foot on dry land again.

Their exile on Fogrock was over, but their worries were not at an end. There remained the risk of eluding Skimpy McClabber while they got their horses.

For the moment, McClabber seemed to have dismissed them from his mind. Some greater issue demanded his undivided attention. He was having what appeared to be a ruckus with the road worker. His ire had taken a new path. He was making agitated gestures toward the milking barn, then toward the waiting cows.

The man in the red hat wasn't enjoying the confab. Whatever was wrong, he was getting blamed for it. McClabber was loosening up his pelt with blistering abuse.

The pardners watched for a restless interval, then Whopper gusted:

"Looks to me like that feller told Mister McClabber that we ain't to blame for that cobblerock ketchup mixup!"

"He ought to be over his mad, then," puffed Swap. "Far's we're concerned, anyhow. Look, he's layin' down his shotgun!"

Whopper wrung salt water out of his clinging sleeves.

"Then what we waitin' for?" he said.

Together the forlorn pair sloshed towards the barnyard. Their arrival was greeted by a greatly-changed McClabber. He looked downcast, even sheepish.

"I hae a sma' matter to discuss wi' ye lads," he requested.

"We're gittin' our hosses and pilin' out of here," Swap told him tartly.

"Hold on now, Mounty Crisco," pleaded McClabber, with a wan smile to show he meant well. "I'm hopin' ye'd linger aboot for a bit."

The man in the red hat spoke up.

"Here's what's eatin' him. That busted pole cut off his power line. The line repair crew ain't showed up. And he can't run his milking machine without electricity."

"So that's it!" sniffed Swap. "He figgers we'll help him milk, huh? Not much!"

McCLABBER wrung his gnarled hands.

"Coom now, laddie, let bygones be bygones. Don't the Gude Buke say love thine enemy and forgive him?"

"Even when he shags around with a shotgun?" demanded Whopper.

"Tush! 'Twas only loaded wi' wee birdshot," wheedled McClabber.

"Yuh mighty near drowned us with it," Swap said severely.

"Besides which," Whopper informed him, "me and Mister Bootle ain't lookin' for work. Specially milkin' jobs."

McClabber made a sorrowful gesture with his dangling, empty hands.

"Think aboot all the babies a-waitin' and a-cryin' for milk," he appealed. "Hae ye na hearts?"

Whopper was more greatly concerned about his stomach and the free Cuyama barbecue. He caught up his roan and settled in saddle with a wet, swishing sound.

"C'mon, pardner," he said. "Let Mister McClabber stew in his own juice."

"You bet! In his own tomato juice," Swap said, picking up the bay-sorrel's reins and lifting a soggy boot to stirrup.

The snipe-faced rancher's try for their sympathies fell on deaf ears. But the two range-bred roamers had ears for a new appeal that sounded just then. It came from the unmilked cows. They set up a bawling. It was a language they understood—the mute call of bovine distress. Milking, like the tide that eddied around Fogrock, was something that would not wait.

The pardners exchanged uncomfortable glances. They realized there were too many cows for one man to milk alone, by hand.

They knew, too, that dairy cattle had to be milked at a regular time, else they'd go dry. That was something to think about.

Slowly and reluctantly Swap lowered his foot from the stirrup.

"Whopper Whaley," he said, "them critters are talkin' at us. They seem to know we savvy what they say. D'yuh think it's right for us to skedaddle thisaway, and leave 'em in the lurch?"

Whopper's long, bony jaw drooped.

"Goshlemity, milkin' is hard work!" he protested vigorously. "And it's plumb agin our principles, besides!"

"Shucks, I know that!"

McClabber was waiting and watching with mixed hope and despair. Swap faced him. His round, guileless eyes hid a shrewdness he'd learned in horse-trading, back in the days when his swapping ability had earned him his nickname.

"Mister McClabber," he stated, "there's a way to git yore milkin' machine in runnin' order in about two shakes."

The snipe-faced man cocked his head sidewise, as though he doubted if he'd heard right.

"Coom now, don't jest wi' a mon in trooble," he blurted brokenly.

"I ain't foolin', Mister McClabber."

"I be a-listenin'," he said cautiously, rubbing his hands together.

Swap pointed to the old pickup truck. "Lift up the hood," he ordered.

McClabber gave a disgusted snort.

"Tush! Ye mean to say cows can be milked wi' a—a truck?"

Swap's prompt and confident retort nearly bowled him over.

"Exackly, Mister McClabber! And it'll milk 'em in a jiffy if yuh do like I tell yuh!"

McClabber shrugged but he raised the engine hood.

"I be a fule to listen to sooch blitherin' nonsense!" he grumbled. "There, talk oop and hae done wi' it!"

Whopper kneed the roan close and gandered. The man in the red hat leaned on one fender as Swap leaned on the other. The little pardner didn't know much about engines but he had a working knowledge of milking machines, enough to know that they were operated by electrically driven exhaust pumps which created vacuum that did the mechanical milking.

"All yuh got to do," he announced, pointing again, "is to start the engine goin', then rig yore air hose to this here windshield wiper connection, savvy? That's all there is to it, Mister McClabber."

"Faw!" flared the other. "Sooch senseless balderdash! I hae a gude mind to—"

HE MADE a menacing move towards Swap. But the man in the red hat halted him by bursting out with:

"You're wrong there, Mac! I ain't up on milking machines, but I'm a mechanic, by golly! And I claim the stunt's okay! It'll work! Drag out that air hose and I'll hook 'er up!"

Skimpy McClabber wasn't one to turn down an offer of free help. He leaped to obey. Other preparations followed swiftly. Soon the cows were in the milking barn and secured to their stanchions. McClabber attached a milk connection to one of them and gave the starting signal.

The man in the red hat got in the pickup and stepped on the starter.

"Here we go, boys," he said.

"We'd better git set to go, too, pardner," fidgeted Whopper. "I got a strong notion this'll wind up bad. You ain't a experienced inventor, like me."

The truck engine rumbled. The vacuum hose jerked with suction pulsations. There was a whirring sound in the barn—and then a loud, jubilant whoop.

"Goshlemity!" cawed Whopper. "It's perkin'!"

"Like a million dollars!" cried the man in the red hat. "Your little pal, he's a mechanical wizard!"

"That's puttin' it purty strong," Whopper said. "I'd say that some of my genius

rubbed off with him, that's all."

Swap, quietly triumphant, laddered himself to saddle.

"Mebbeso," he said. "On the other hand, I got some practical notions of my own, Whopper Whaley."

"The practical thing to do now," Whopper declared, "is to make Mister McClabber fork over. Soak him good. I figger he owes us plenty. Even ten dollars ain't too much."

"Nope," refused Swap. "Gittin' money out of a born skimflint like him is harder'n workin' for it. No use hangin' around here no longer."

"Mebbe yuh're right, pardner," Whopper said resignedly.

They started for the road. They were still within shotgun reach when Skimpy McClabber popped out of the milking barn. Seeing them taking off, he grabbed up his double-barrel and whooped after them:

"Halt!" he cried. "Halt in ye're tracks!"

The pardners froze. It was too late to do anything else. A prickly sensation raced up and down Whopper's spine.

"I knowed it!" he groaned. "Sumthin' went haywire, as usual! We ought to've vamoosed sooner!"

McClabber gallivanted up to them and addressed them breathlessly:

"I be a wicked mon but a repentant one. I'm vurry sorry for the slight inconvenience I've caused the two o' ye."

They were dazed by the forthright apology. The sudden end of all tension left them limp and wobbly. They were free to go, to resume their idle wandering. Swap felt so good about that that all resentment seeped out of him.

"Shucks, we ain't packin' no grudge," Swap told him politely. "No sir, not even for that turrible tomato soup."

Skimpy McClabber was unoffended. He beamed fondly at Swap. His eyes turned strangely moist and he blinked rapidly.

"Ye be a big little mon, Mounty Crisco," he babbled brokenly. "And I'm bound to admit I'm na overfond of the stuff myself. I admire ye're honesty, I do."

He shifted the shotgun to the crook of an elbow and dug out a worn leather wallet. Whopper, leaning and rubbering, saw him fingering through a sheaf of crumpled ones and fives. He nearly toppled off the roan as he saw him select a yellow currency note from among the greenbacks and press it into Swap's hand.

"G-goshlemity, Mister McClabber!" yammered Whopper. "Th-that's a—a hundred-dollar bill!"

"Ay, just so. And bein' hard to spend, it'll teach ye both to be thrifty," Skimpy McClabber said huskily. "Gude day and gude luck."

Whereupon he turned and marched back to his milking.

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AND MANY OTHER STORIES

Carson came across the room and struck at him

BROTHERS AT LAW

By WILLIAM VANCE

The marshal and the new town tamer knew each other . . . too well

CHRIS CARSON sat his dun-colored horse in front of Fordyce's and said, "Thanks, boys." He just sat there, knowing the act of getting out of the saddle would be painful because he'd been there so long.

Ferd Spratling and Dick Clanton said, "That's all right, Marshal," and they rode on down the dusty street, as tired as Carson but not as discouraged, he thought as he watched them go. They didn't have his responsibilities.

He finally slid to the ground and his legs felt as if they'd never come unbowed. He stood there leaning against the patient dun, a tall and big-shouldered man with

a flat belly and flat lean thighs. He raised his hat, feeling the band stick to the skin of his forehead. He ran tough brown fingers through short, crisply-curling black hair. His face was brown under the trail dust and his gray eyes held a vast amount of self-confidence that amounted almost to arrogance.

Billy Hale, a pale-faced gambler, walked out of Fordyce's and stopped suddenly, his long white fingers at his black string tie. "Any luck, Chris?" he asked.

Carson shook his head and set his hat on the back of his head. "Lost him," he growled.

"Maybe you should've stayed in town," Billy Hale said and went along the street with his weak, shaky walk.

Carson didn't answer, wondering what the man meant, knowing he'd find out soon enough. He tied in at the tooth-marked rail and crossed the board walk and went into the saloon. Ben Fordyce was leaning on the bar, talking to a man nearly as big as Carson.

Carson stared, his lips thinning and a white line around them.

Fordyce lifted his impassive eyes to Carson. He said, "Just talking about you, Chris." His voice was cheerful and hearty, as saloonkeepers often are. "This is Sam Reno, our new constable. Reno, this is Chris Carson, Deputy U. S. Marshal for this district—"

He stopped suddenly, looking from Carson to Reno. "Maybe you two know each other already."

"What makes you think so?" Carson's voice was harsh.

Reno continued to lean on the bar, a slight cynical smile on his otherwise impassive brown face. His big strangely blue eyes protruded slightly and held a touch of cruelty.

"Pretty young for a marshal," Reno said dryly. He spoke in a soft but penetrating drawl.

Carson's face was still hard. "Old enough to vote," he said.

"Any luck, Chris?" Fordyce asked hastily and began scrubbing an already shining bar top.

CARSON put his hat on the bar and had his drink before he answered and he tried to hide his trembling hand. "The trail ran out," he said.

Reno stirred. He said, "I'll be in my office, Marshal," and stalked to the door. His movements were like those of an oversized cat. He turned a sharp glance in either direction at the door and drifted silently away.

"That's your town tamer, huh?" Carson set his glass on the bar and Fordyce nodded gloomily. "Whose idea is that?"

Fordyce shook his head, "Not mine," he said. "I want a wide open town. He'll do away with that."

Carson's eyes swept the saloon. "You made fast time on repairs," he said. "Jack Luray and his gang did a good job of wrecking it." He leaned across the bar. "Tell me something, Ben."

Fordyce's eyes and thoughts had followed Sam Reno down the street. He pulled them back inside, his mind suddenly sharp. "Anything I know," he said.

"What'd you and Luray fall out about?"

Ben Fordyce waved an easy hand. "We was never in to fall out, Chris. He can't run me. He tried to and didn't like my answer."

Carson thought somberly about that and then he got his hat from the bar and said, "See you, Ben."

The town constable's office was a frame shack on the corner of Custer and Cottonwood. The first thing Chris noticed was a door had been cut in the rear wall. He saw that and he said, "You always need two doors."

The constable sat at ease in the chair, neat for such a big man. He wore a short black coat that didn't interfere with the two wooden-handled .44's that were tied down. He had a neat black string tie with a soft white shirt. Instead of boots, Reno wore button shoes with a rider's high heels. His eyes were hard and steady and they were disconcertingly direct. "It's proved out for me," he said drily.

"You dirty dog," Carson said. "You dirty dog."

Reno said easily, "I used to belt you,

kid, when you got out of line."

"I remember," Carson said. "I remember a lot of things, Sam. But most of all I remember Ma. How she worried about you and grieved over you. She died of a broken heart, Sam."

"Mothers are like that, kid," Reno said and Carson came across the room and struck at him.

Reno wasn't there. He simply shifted away and stood there with a gun in his hand, half-lifted. "I could bend this around your head, kid," he said softly. "But I won't because it wouldn't learn you nothing. You're thick headed as the old man and you'll never know nothing but things that are dull."

Carson stood there, rage in him, a helpless rage that he remembered from long, long ago, when Sam was bigger and stronger and could handle him easily enough. Remembering that cooled him off. He said, "Always like to get things straight, Sam. For a moment I forgot my business." He pulled a cane-bottom chair from against the wall and sat in it, stretching his long legs out before him.

Sam Reno dropped back into his chair and the gun disappeared. He inspected his brown fingers. He flexed them and in that moment Chris knew Sam's reputation wasn't built on a few lucky draws. Reno continued to look at his fingers in silence.

"Constables don't usually like to have anything to do with a Government man," Chris went on. "I don't care one way or the other. The town's yours and outside is mine. I want that understood."

Sam Reno looked at him with those hard, piercing eyes. He said in his soft voice, "It's a dirty business, Chris, What're you in it for?"

"What're *you* in it for?" Chris couldn't keep the challenge out of his voice.

"It's my trade," Reno said. "A bad trade. You're young yet, Chris. Get out of it."

Chris said, "Coming from you that's something. Who'd you ever worry about, except the name Sam Carson?"

THE NEW constable's eyes flamed. "Don't ever call me that," he said "Don't do it, Chris," He stood up, his blue eyes still flaming. "Maybe you should hear the other side of it, Chris. You didn't know anything about Pa, except he was good to you. You was his favorite. When I got big enough to work, I worked. Out in line camp one time, he beat me with his gun because I got scared of a hoot owl and kept him awake with my bawling. You had it easy, Chris, and I didn't. That's the difference. When I run away, I swore I'd never use the name Carson again, and I haven't, and I won't!" He stopped suddenly, out of breath and then dropped back into his seat. "I've said it and now forget it," he said harshly.

"You was mean and no-good," Chris said between his teeth. "But that's all water over the dam. I just as soon not have it known you're my brother. I'm here on business. Jack Luray is my man, in town or out. I want him."

Reno raised his eyebrows a fraction of an inch. "What's on him?"

Chris gave his head a quick shake. "A killing. The man whose star you're wearing. He's in everything and everywhere but I can't prove it. Cattle and horses. A stage that's carrying something extra, though how he knows—"

Reno leaned forward in his seat. "You're a knothead," he said. "Didn't I tell you it's a dirty business?"

"What do you mean?" Chris asked heatedly.

"You don't know what's happening?" There was contempt in Reno's voice and Chris flushed but he kept silent. "It's him and Fordyce."

Chris crushed down the instant disbelief and considered Reno's statement. Then he said slowly, "Ben Fordyce is my friend. But we'll forget that for a moment. Jack tried to kill him. He wrecked his place. He swore he'd come back and kill him. It doesn't make sense that he and Fordyce would be in this together."

"Thieves fall out," Reno said, "and it makes a noise."

Somewhere out in the dusk that gathered around them, a pianola sounded. Chris knew it was Cookie Stevens, playing

some haunting thing out of his past before he began his night's work. It seemed to act as a signal. With a jangle of bit chains, a creak of leather and the soft kluck-kluck of greased hubs on axles, the evening stage swung wide into Custer. A few riders drifted by singly, in pairs and clusters, to tie in at Ben Fordyce's. Chris and Reno stood and Chris said, "I can't take that now."

Reno merely said, "Think I'll check the stage." He gave his guns a quick pull half out of his holsters and shoved them back. He went out the door and not without the quick glance to the right and left. Chris stood in the doorway, watching frowningly. Reno didn't walk directly to the unloading stage. He went across the street, circled and came up and stood by the rear boot watching quietly. The town seemed uncommonly devoid of noise to Chris and he shook his head.

A white slender figure slipped in at the door.

Chris said, "Mary Lou," in a voice filled with pleasure.

She stood close to him, her fingers possessively on his arm and she said, breathlessly, "Billy Hale was talking to pa. I heard him say you were back. I got tired of waiting!"

He laughed a joyous lifting laugh at her rush of words that left her breathless. They were close then and he felt the warmth and softness of her. "I never get tired of waiting for you," he said lightly.

She shook his arm. "Stop that. I've been miserable. And worried."

His long arms pulled her to him and he tipped her head, holding her chin with his brown fingers. "Don't do it," he said. "Won't get you anything but gray hairs."

She put her head on his chest. "I wish you were out of it," she said simply.

He was silent for long moments, thinking it strange that Reno had almost said the same thing. For a moment he was disturbed, irritation running through him.

She sensed it. She put her hand on his shoulder, looking up at him. "What is it, Chris?"

"I was thinking," he said, "about a man being pulled too many ways."

SHE WAS never instantly agreeable. She thought about that and then she said, "A woman wants her man in one piece, Chris. I keep thinking about that part of it."

They stepped away from each other as Sam Reno stood inside the door in the dimness. Both of them were silent as he moved across the room and struck a match and lighted the lamp in the wall bracket. He turned.

"Mary Lou, this is the new constable, Sam Reno," Chris said. "Reno, Mary Lou Baldwin. We're goin' to be married Saturday."

Reno's eyes were respectful as he took her hand and bent his head over it. "I hope you'll be real happy," he said in his soft voice. His eyes went to Chris for a brief moment and he said, "I think you're both lucky."

She said impulsively, "Won't you come to our wedding? I'd like to have you."

Reno watched her face, neither accepting nor refusing. He said, "Get him out of this business or you won't have a husband."

Mary Lou raised her head to Chris and gave him a told-you-so look. She didn't answer for at that moment their attention was drawn to the street.

A voice was raised out there—ribald, raucous and challenging: "Where's this here town tamer? I want to meet up with him. Town Tamer, come on out!"

"See what I mean?" asked Reno. "There's always this." He stepped to the lamp and blew in the chimney top and put the room in darkness. He made a scant rustling sound as he left the room with a quick, "It's my town, Carson, Stay here."

Mary Lou said, "There's something about him, Chris. Something familiar."

Chris was silent, remembering some of the things he didn't want to remember.

"It's almost as if I knew him," she went on and then suddenly exclaimed, "I know what it is, Chris—he reminds me of you. He's enough like you to—"

Chris whirled. "Don't say it," he said

harshly. "Don't say it and don't even think it!" He walked to the door and she followed.

"Why, Chris," she said, her voice puzzled and hurt.

He stood staring out into the night and she was silent, watching the street. Two men sat their horses in the middle of Custer City's dusty main street. Cookie Stevens' pianola was silent now, as was the town. Chris looked for and couldn't see Reno.

Then Reno appeared out of the gloom, across the street. He said, "Here."

BOTH men jumped, looking wildly. One of them turned his body in the saddle and the gun in his hand cracked. Yellow light lanced out from where Reno stood. The horseman swayed and toppled to the ground. Reno was gone, fading back into the shadows. The other man looked stupidly at his fallen comrade. He spurred his horse toward the spot where Reno had stood a moment before. He pulled back on his reins and his horse walked a circle while he tried to get his shot. Reno's gun blasted again, knocking the second man from his saddle.

The savagery of it hit Chris. He took Mary Lou's arm and felt it tremble. He said, "I'll take you home."

She clung to him for a moment; then she went with him.

THERE was a slow rhythmical creak of a rocking chair when Chris and Mary Lou reached the Baldwin home, back away from Custer.

Curt Baldwin stopped rocking and the creaking sound stopped as he leaned forward. "What's the shootin' about?"

"The new town marshal," Chris said.

"That you, with Mary Lou Chris?"

"Who else?" Chris asked sharply and Mary Lou's father gave a low chuckle.

Mary Lou said, "I'll fix you a bite, Chris."

He was silent and she went on into the house.

The two men were silent for a long while, listening to the pleasant rattle of dishes from the kitchen. Then Baldwin said, "Fordyce won't like this."

"They came looking for him," Chris observed, though he didn't want to defend Sam Reno.

"There's some who think Reno is working with Jack Luray," Baldwin said. "Jack was in town while you were looking for him."

"There's always folks who'll say that about the law," Chris answered, sighing. But quick rage boiled up in him because Reno hadn't mentioned Luray coming to town while he was out scouring the brush for the outlaw. That sort of thing could make a marshal look ridiculous. Probably it was just what Reno wanted, he thought bitterly. He could be laughed out of the country. And why hadn't Ben Fordyce told him? Ben was supposed to be his friend. What was it Reno had said—that Fordyce and Luray were partners. His disturbed thoughts ran the rounds and came back to rest on Reno. Running into Reno was the most disturbing thing that had happened to Carson since he became a marshal.

"Listen, son," Baldwin interrupted his thoughts, "your business is your own and I ain't aiming to interfere now—or later." He paused and scratched a match and puffed at his pipe, the light flaring each time he exhaled. The match made a small flaming arc in the soft night and Baldwin continued. "I see a lot of things that maybe you miss, because you're here and there and I'm right here all the time."

Impatience and contempt struggled in Carson for a moment before he said, "Meaning I'm too knotheaded, Curt?"

"Don't go off half-cocked," Baldwin answered. "I mean watch Ben Fordyce, Chris. Maybe he is your friend, but he'll bear watching."

The quick retort died on Carson's lips when Mary Lou said from the doorway, "Supper's waiting, Chris."

He was disturbed as he ate, listening with only half his mind to Mary Lou as she told him about the difficulties she was having getting her wedding gown properly fitted. Her chatter was pleasant and mean-

ingless and she was glad he didn't have to concentrate on it, because too many other things were tugging at him. As he sat there eating, discontent filled his heart, putting lines between his eyes and across his forehead. He was remembering Sam, the last time he'd seen him. He lived again his shock when he had seen Sam and Pa struggling there in the ranch yard, wrestling, hitting and choking each other, and he remembered his horror at the sight, while his mother wrung her hands and called for them to quit fighting. That was the last time he had seen Sam until now. For that same night Sam had left the ranch, taking the old crowbait that was his only possession. Sam had disappeared and they'd never heard from him. Chris wondered about the trails Sam had ridden, the reputation he'd acquired as Sam Reno. Chris nodded, remembering he had heard of Reno; who hadn't? He'd tamed Abilene and Dodge and others, and chances were he'd do the same for Custer City.

"You haven't heard a word I've said," Mary Lou said and her hand was in his crisp hair, fondling it, and there was love in her touch.

"Sure I did," he said, pushing his plate away from him and reaching for his pipe. "Custer City just hasn't got a dressmaker that's worth a hoot."

"That was fifteen minutes ago," she sighed and rumpled his hair and then began picking up the dishes.

CHRIS shoved his pipe back into his pocket and watched her as she went from the table to the kitchen sink. He got up and came up to the sink and began pumping water, leaning over to drink from the tap. He raised his head with water dripping from his chin and she swiped at his chin with her kitchen towel, laughing at him as she dodged away from his reaching hands.

He stopped suddenly, swinging away from her as he heard voices from the front porch where he'd left Curt Baldwin. He tramped across the room and went out on the porch.

"Howdy, Marshal," Dick Clanton said. "Guess you heard about Luray, huh?"

"About him being in town while we were looking for him? Sure." The word was going around quick, he thought.

Clanton lit his cigaret, shaking his head in the light of the match. "He's down at Fordyce's right now," Clanton said.

Carson heard Mary Lou let out her breath behind him. He stood there for a moment, wondering about Jack Luray—what it was that made him do the things he did. Then he reached for his hat and said, "I'll have a look." He went down the steps and Mary Lou flew down after him. She pressed against him for a moment and whispered, "Be careful, Chris," and was gone.

Dick Clanton called, "Want me to go with you, Marshal?"

Without thinking about it, Chris said, "No," and went through the darkness toward the yellow lights of Custer Street.

A glowing dot of red on the porch of the Palmer House pulled him up the steps and he leaned against the porch rail and said, "How's it going, Shady? You still night constable?"

Shady Thompson grunted. "I don't go on till midnight, Marshal. How's it with you?"

"Still looking for Luray," Chris replied idly.

"You've not far to look," Shady said. "He's coming out of Ben Fordyce's right now."

Chris stood in the darkness and watched Luray mount his horse and turn him downstreet at a walk. He said, "Mind if I take your pony, Shady?"

Shady Thompson gestured, "He's there, marshal."

Chris went down the steps and untied the night constable's horse and mounted. He moved down the street after Luray, holding the horse in and letting Luray get further ahead. At Stinking Creek, he put the horse down the bank and across the creek to keep from making a lot of noise on the bridge. Once clear of town, Luray put his horse to a hard gallop and before Chris realized it, the outlaw was out of sight.

Chris pushed his mount ahead, cursing

because he'd not got his own horse. The night constable's horse was fat and not too willing, probably because Shady Thompson didn't use the animal enough.

The night was still and the smell of dust in the air kept Chris on the trail. Shortly before midnight, he pulled up the lathered animal and watched the pin point of yellow light through the night. It was a campfire and a small one, located above the springs at the mouth of Deep Canyon. He got off his horse and, because he didn't know the animal, he knotted the reins to a clump of brush. He went on then, with his gun in his hand.

Before he got to the fire, the embers scattered and Carson squatted, thinking he'd been seen. But loud voices came to him and, from the sounds, he knew the men thought they were unobserved. They were breaking camp. The thud of hoofs reached his ears, along with deep easy curses from the riders. He knew from the sounds they had fresh horses, and he cursed again as he ran back to his own spent mount.

He tried to keep up but his horse was done for and he knew it. He turned back, knowing he would have to walk part of the way to Custer City, and that didn't help his temper.

It was broad daylight when he limped into Custer City, leading the exhausted horse. A swamper at Fordyce's watched him as he led the horse through the alley beside the Palmer House toward the barn. He wiped the animal down, allowed it to drink sparingly and then led it back to a stall and pored grain into the feed box. He stopped by the office, which Tex Carmichael also used for sleeping quarters, and pounded on the door. When Tex answered in a sleepy voice, Chris told him to water Shady Thompson's horse when he got up. He went on then, through the back door of the Palmer House, into the kitchen.

MADGE Palmer was laying a fire in the big cook stove. She said, "Good morning, Marshal," and went on with her work. Chris took a chair and tugged at his boots. He got them off finally and walked barefoot to the sink where he washed his face and hands. Madge brought him a towel and, while he scrubbed his face, she said, "The Bozeman stage was held up last night, Marshal."

He stopped scrubbing with the towel, wondering if there was a note of accusation in her voice. "Tell me about it," he said. He placed the towel carefully on a rack beside the sink.

She shrugged and turned to the stove, lifting the big black coffee pot and taking it to the pump at the kitchen sink. "Not much to tell," she said. "Chuck Tate rode his offwheeler in about two-three o'clock this morning. He'd been shot and was near dead from bleeding so much. He told Reno a gang held him up on the turn, just north of Deep Canyon."

"Reno, huh?"

She nodded. "He's just what this town needs. We've had two killings since he got here. I'll bet we don't have many more." She compressed her lips in a thin line and marched back to the stove with the coffee pot.

Chris was tugging at his boots, trying to get them back on. His feet were swollen. He felt like swearing. Finally he stood up with his boots in his hands.

Madge Palmer said, "You want some ham and eggs? The stove'll be hot in another minute or two."

He said, "I'm not hungry," trying to sound snappish, and walked out carrying his boots.

Shady Thompson was climbing the stairs to his room when Chris got to the front part of the Palmer House. The old man stopped, waiting.

"I put your horse away," Chris told him and, because he was so weary, he sat on the bottom step. "Quiet last night?"

"You heard about Tate gettin' shot?" Shady asked.

Chris nodded. "Did he see anybody he knew?"

"Said not," Shady replied. "Dark night and all that. Where'd you lose Luray?"

"Up near Deep Canyon, and he'd just about have time to get to where the stage

was held up." Chris stood up, swinging his boots.

Shady eyed the boots. "Feet hurt?"

Chris tramped barefoot toward the door. "I had to carry that horse of yours home," he said. He stopped suddenly. "Was Luray looking for Fordyce last night?"

"Don't know," Shady said. "If he was, he wasn't looking hard."

The town quieted down just as Madge predicted. Ben Fordyce went around with a worried frown on his face. The free-spending trail crews were riding wide of Custer City. Other businessmen didn't mind, because the small ranchers, the farmers, the family men increased their patronage when the word went around that the wild-riding, boisterous trail crews were staying clear of Custer City. On Sunday the Reverend Graham Wilder, without mentioning names, hinted that Sam Reno was God's gift to Custer City.

On Wednesday morning, with the town still quiet, U. S. Marshal Pearly Walters arrived on the stage from the south. He was Chris's boss and while he was a politician, he'd found time to learn what was going on in his district.

He was a squat heavy-set man who wore dark broadcloth and liked fancy piping on his vest which sported a gold-nugget watch chain. He came fresh from a breakfast at the Palmer House, picking his teeth and burping comfortably. He took a chair next to the window with his back to Chris Carson.

"The whole country's laughing, Chris," Walters said, "at you."

Chris fought down an impulse to say something harsh—anything. He waited a few minutes and then he said evenly, "Maybe I should grab a gun and go out and shoot a few gossips—including one at the Palmer House, where you probably got a couple of stories in addition to your breakfast."

Pearly Walters laughed soundlessly. "You're getting some sense, Chris. Maybe if you stay alive long enough, you'll get real smart."

"You didn't get that at the Palmer House," Chris said.

THE MARSHAL continued to shake with silent laughter, his enormous head bobbing. "I sure didn't, Chris." He stopped laughing as suddenly as he'd started. "What's going on here, Chris? I want to know from you."

"Luray," Chris said. "He's smart as a jack, quick with a gun and got what it takes to run a bunch of cutthroats." He got up from his desk and went around where he could see Walters' face. "A combination like that's hard to beat, Marshal."

Walters nodded. He said, "That's not all, Chris. Luray had an in—with a man named Fordyce, Ben Fordyce."

Chris was shaking his head slowly from side to side when Walters held up a pudgy hand. "That is, he was. Now Fordyce is out and the gunfighter Reno is Luray's partner. I got my information straight, Chris. That's it!"

Fordyce and Reno. His friend and his brother. Chris sucked in his breath, inwardly doubting and yet knowing Walters spoke the truth. He glanced out the window, straightened and looked again. Sam Reno walked slowly down Custer. Mary Lou Baldwin walked beside him, looking up at him, smiling.

"Just a moment, Marshal," Chris said from the door. "I'll be right back."

He went outside and waited, all the rage of frustration rising up in him. A few steps from him, Mary Lou left Reno and came toward him. He ignored her, looking at Reno.

Sam Reno had a mocking smile on his face. "You better take better care of your girl, Marshal," he said.

Chris didn't smile. He said, "I'll take care, Reno, without any help from you."

Mary Lou said, "Chris!"

Reno stopped short and the mocking smile left his face. He said, "I've some information for you, Chris."

Chris stood there, wanting to smash Reno, yet knowing it was the wrong thing to do. He had to get this Luray business cleaned up; then he could take care of Reno. "What is it?" he asked harshly.

Reno got the mocking smile back on his lips. "It's Luray," he said. "I got a tip he'll

be in Deep Canyon early tomorrow morning. He's to meet someone there."

Chris looked closely at Reno, studying him, trying to see what lay behind his words. The mocking smile played with Reno's lips and he seemed to be enjoying himself.

"I don't believe you, Reno," Chris said.

Reno shrugged. "Maybe you don't want to," he said. He moved away, halted and half-turned. "I'll go up and help—"

Chris interrupted. "You're too helpful, Reno. You figure things, don't you?"

Reno didn't answer and he turned and moved down the street.

Mary Lou took Chris's arm. "You hate him, Chris. Why?"

He shook his head. "Because he's mean and no-good," Chris said, without thinking of what he was saying. It just came to his lips unbidden. He wondered why it was he didn't believe it after he'd said it.

"How do you know?" she insisted. "You've just met him. He's a stranger and yet you seem to know him. Why—"

"Stop it," he said between his teeth. "Stop it, Mary Lou." Jealousy flared in him again, an acute physical jealousy, and he tried ineffectually to stifle it. He said, "There's some things a man just naturally knows. This's one of those times."

"He's concerned about you," Mary Lou said. "It seems strange that this should be so, but it is. And you seem to hate him."

"I don't hate him," Chris said defensively. "I reckon maybe I just got mad because you stuck up for him."

She laughed as she shook his arm. "Just for that," she said, "I'll walk to the dressmaker's alone. Saturday's getting close, Chris."

"Sure you don't want to back out?"

"Don't try to get away from me now," she advised and went down the street, leaving Chris discontented.

He went back inside. Pearly Walters was setting his hat on his big shock of bushy hair.

CHRIS looked at him inquiringly. "I'm taking the noon stage," Pearly said. "It's in your hands, Chris. I'm not presuming to tell you what to do."

Carson watched the short bulky man move down the street toward the hotel and stage stop. Then he closed the door to his office, stretched himself out on a cot in the corner and went to sleep.

It was dark when Chris awoke. He scratched a match and looked at the clock on his desk. It was two minutes to midnight. He got up stretching and yawning and got his gunbelt from the desk and buckled it around his waist. He took a saddle gun from the rack on the wall and an extra box of ammunition. He went out the back door and cut through the alley by the Palmer House to the corral and barn in the rear. He saddled the dun in the darkness and led the animal back through the alley beside the Palmer House. He met Shady Thompson at the mouth of the alley.

"Going to work?" Chris asked.

Shady stopped and lighted a cigarette. He held the match up and Chris waved it out. "Nah," Shady answered. "Reno told me to go back to bed."

Chris felt a tingle along his spine. "Working your shift, huh?"

"Yep," Shady sighed. "Funny guy, Reno. I slept all day. Guess I'll not be sleepy now. Where you going this time of the night?"

"Just got back," Chris said and turned, pulling the horse after him.

He put the animal in its stall and came back through the alley. He squatted beside the front porch and watched Custer Street. A lone horse drowsed in front of Fordyce's and a man without a hat came out of the saloon and angled across the street, walking uncertainly.

Carson waited with cold patience. He stood up for a time to take the kinks out of his legs and then squatted again quickly as a man came out of Fordyce's and pulled the reins loose from the rail. The man mounted in an unsteady manner and rode down the street, singing in a soft monotone.

Chris relaxed, still waiting, beginning to think he was wrong when he heard the thunder of many horses crossing Stinking

Creek bridge. He got his gun out and stood there in the darkness, feeling the quick thud of his heart against his ribs, his palm sweaty where he gripped his Colt. He knew this was what he waited on.

The horsemen spread out along Custer and came to a halt between Forsythe's and the Palmer House. Chris thought is was Luray out in front of the others and he knew it was Luray when the outlaw raised his voice.

"Hey, Reno! Come on out, Reno!"

Carson felt a strange, tingling thrill at this call through the night. He started out and then sank back as a dark shape detached itself from the shadows and came out, a white shirt gleaming against the soft darkness. Sam Reno had shed his coat, though the night was chill.

Chris moved out too, just as Reno said, "Here, men. Right over here!"

The first gun went off then, one of Reno's wooden-handled .44's and then the other.

The horsemen broke in the center of the street, and men cursed and other guns went off as Chris found himself beside Reno, the gun in his hand jumping and the pungent smell of powder in his nose.

There were two men down in the street. A riderless horse ran across the board walk and blundered into the awning props, over at the drygood store. Chris and Reno walked steadily toward the men, firing as they walked. Two more men dropped and the others put spurs to their horses and raced down Custer, firing recklessly.

Reno said, "I was trying to keep you out of this, Chris. You got a date Saturday, remember?"

"Yeah, Sam," Chris said, sucking in his breath. "I know, Sam. But I ran into Shady."

Reno thrust out his head and peered at him through the darkness.

"I really hate to do it, Sam," Chris said. "But I got to do it. I got to take you in—" He stopped as Ben Fordyce stepped through the door of his saloon with a gun in his hand. The gun cracked once and then again, quick. Reno fell against Chris as the deputy marshal thumbed back the hammer on his Colt and fired.

FORDYCE fell against the hitching rail in front of his saloon and raised the gun in his hand. Chris fired again and Fordyce drooped over the rail, the gun falling into the dust. Chris was holding Reno in his arms, a dead weight. He let Reno down easy, holding his head out of the dust.

Lights flashed on in the Palmer House and Chris looked desperately around for help. Shady Thompson came running across the street, throwing his suspenders over his shoulder with one hand and carrying a gun in the other. He stumbled over a dead man and cursed roundly.

Reno stirred on the ground and Chris held him down. "Wait'll the doc shows, Sam," he urged. "Take it easy till then."

"Hell," Reno said, "Fordyce just creased me." He struggled to his feet and began looking in the dust for his guns.

"I got 'em, Sam," Chris said gently with a great hurt inside him. It came to him then that, as he and Sam walked out there side by side, something that had been missing in his life was complete. He didn't feel alone now.

He saw Sam watching him expectantly. Chris wasn't sure in the darkness, but he thought he saw a flash of white teeth. It'd be like Sam to laugh at a time like this. He said heavily, "I got to take you in, Sam."

"If you feel like you got to," Reno said, "why, go ahead."

Chris fingered the wooden-handled guns. He felt like shoving them at Reno and telling the town constable to ride out.

Men were filling the street now and Chris heard someone say, "Hey, Fordyce is moving!"

Chris went over there and found Fordyce with his back against a post. Someone had a lantern and the light glinted on the dark and bloody shirt front of the saloonkeeper.

Fordyce's eyes wavered off Chris and came to rest on Reno. A weak smile went across his face. Then he winced with pain. "Tell me, Reno," he said, "I got a right to know. You with Wells-Fargo—you a special agent?"

"I'm with the Cattlemen's Association," Reno said.

"That dirty, double-crossing—" Fordyce stopped as a spasm of pain shook him.

"You son of a gun!" Chris muttered. "You son of a gun, you. I told you Luray was my man, didn't I? Suppose you are working for the Cattleman's Association —why treat me like a kid?"

Sam Reno grinned. "You are a kid, Chris. My kid brother. But the main thing is the trap worked. Fordyce and Luray worked the old game to a fare-you-well. Fordyce tipped Luray off to where the good hauls were, but finally they fell out, like I said. I convinced Luray I'd be a better tipper-off than Fordyce anyway. But then Ben and Jack got together and decided I was bad for both of them. They figured to plant me here."

"What's the big idea," Chris demanded hotly, "of you trying to get me out of town at such a time?"

"A gal named Mary Lou," Reno said, brushing dust from his pants. He straightened. "And I'm coming to the wedding, too. Got a special invite."

"You better be there," growled Chris. "To kiss the bride. Just once, Sam, just once." He grinned in the darkness, feeling good at having some family around him. A man needed his kinfolks close by. Just in case. ● ● ●

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GRAND COUP

CHAPTER 1

The Green Noose

THE Comanches killed the night guard without a sound. In and under the wagons the little party of nesters slept on. If they dreamed, it was of free grass, and of a broad green road beckoning to sure wealth. The price of Texas steers this May of 1870 had jumped from three dollars to ten. All a man had to do was travel far enough beyond the settlements to preempt grass, and for two weeks they had been moving on and on, lured into the Staked Plains by grass which always looked a little greener just ahead.

Now, in the dawn, the Comanches were crawling among the wagons. They were busy knifing the sleepers when a pony hobbled inside the circle snorted, and made a hobbled run to escape. An Indian jabbed with a lance, and the sudden scream of the wounded horse awakened all but the dead.

White men grabbed for guns. Indians leaped to finish them off before they could get clear of their blankets. There were shots, and screaming—mostly screaming. Burning wadding set fire to a wagon cover, and pale flames licked around the circle.

Something heavy landed on young Fred Smith. Something ripped viciously through his blanket. The scream of the horse was ringing in his ears. He rolled under the weight, and realized only then that he had rolled onto an arm holding a knife. Part of his blanket was jammed against his face, yet he could smell the Indian—the sour reek of rancid buffalo fat, and with that a fresh, clean odor, like pine gum and sweet grass.

The Indian was trying to roll him over and to pull the knife out from under his body, but the blade was driven too deep into the earth. Fred was trying to get at his rifle, but though he could feel the butt against his side the blanket pinioned his arms.

"Gal!" he yelled.

THE cry was instinctive, and inaudible. All it got him was the taste of blanket wool against his lips, but in his extremity

A Novelet by **RALPH R. PERRY**

Though one aimed to save life and the other to kill, white lad and Indian boy faced parallel problems in that wagon train raid

Suddenly Fred raised the Colt and swung clubwise

he was calling for help on the best man he knew, the uncle that in all his life had never let him down.

Fred had just turned seventeen, and those who called him "kid" didn't think of him with a capital K. Just the kid; more often, Gal Jones' kid, just a freckle-faced orphan, gangling and lean, who hoped he'd be a man like Gal Jones one of these days, but who was still in that stage where a boy wonders what he'll do when the chips are down.

If he couldn't keep bearing down on the Indian's arm the Indian was going to kill him sure enough. He wasn't afraid, and that surprised him. He just wondered if he could do it or not. He got his legs out of the blanket and kicked, but all he hit was air.

Then the Indian gasped, and the arm straining under the kid's body suddenly went limp. The kid rolled the weight off his chest and kept on rolling. The blanket came off and he got hold of his rifle. As he swung the muzzle up he had a choice of targets, and as he pulled the trigger he wondered just why he shifted his aim at the last instant. It was all done too fast for thought, yet what he saw over his gun-sights remained as clear as an image revealed by lightning.

An Indian boy of about his own age was wrenching at a knife driven deep into hard earth. The face was unpainted, and gleamed in the light from the burning wagons like a penny rubbed in sand. On his chest the boy wore a medicine bag of white leather. The foresight of Fred's gun touched this perfect bull's eye.

Beyond, a big brave painted in stripes of yellow and black, with eagle feathers in his hair, was aiming a strange kind of rifle that had two barrels, one above the other, at Bart Cassidy's wagon.

The kid hated Cassidy. Nevertheless he shot the big Indian through the head. The powder smoke from the kid's war-worn, single-shot Enfield musket enveloped him. He fumbled frantically for a cartridge and bit through the paper, rammed home a minie ball, and snatched for a percussion cap.

The cap slipped from the nipple of the Enfield. The Indian boy let go of the knife, seized a strange rifle and fled, limping from a wound. The white kid set the second percussion cap properly, but now there was nothing to shoot at.

Facing him were three blazing wagons, the covers burned away, and the bows starting to catch fire. Bart Cassidy jumped out of his wagon and started to beat out the fire that had caught his shirt.

"You hit, kid?" called Gal Jones from the wagon behind Fred.

"I reckon not. No."

"Then get me out of here pronto."

Gal gave the order crisply and coolly, but he was a veteran of Lee's army and the Indian wars. He lay in the bed of the wagon, where he had slept. The blankets over his legs were beginning to smolder, and half his beard was black ash. Across his body lay an Indian who did not stir, even though embers glowed dully on his naked back.

"Thanks for shootin' that Injun off me," the kid said.

"Not me, kid. I never pulled trigger. Lift me easy. I'm knifed in the backbone and can't feel nothing in my legs."

"You—you ain't going to—"

"Burn? Not now, if you get a move on."

The kid was appalled. There had always been Gal to give orders, to encourage. Gal *couldn't* die. Without him—

"Kid, lay me next to that war chief you shot. You done well, kid. I saw you through a chink in the wagon— How many horses have the Injuns left us?"

"There's Bart Cassidy's roan, and Syme's gray. The gray is cut up some."

"Is that all? Only two?" For an instant Gal's voice shook. He recovered and added harshly, "Count the folks."

"I can see six."

THE kid lifted the dying man and staggered under his weight beyond the reach of the heat from the burning wagon. As he lay Gal on the grass beside the dead Indian the soldier's face was gray. He said: "Which six?"

"Cassidy and Hogan, Lila Hogan and

her ma, and you and me."

"A tough hombre looking out for Number One only, a fat bag of wind who don't signify whatever, and two women," said Gal under his breath. "Kid, listen close. Bart Cassidy will kill you for a horse. He wants Lila, and he'll settle with the Hogans later, but he don't need you none at all. Mind that, kid. You're plumb surplus. Unless you get more horses pronto, they'll get rid of you first, then fight among themselves."

"Shiloh's comin' this way, Gal."

"Reach me my rifle. Listen close and think fast."

Shiloh Hogan swaggered from his wagon and kicked the dead Indian. He was a fat, middle-aged man who always looked sweaty. His voice was louder than usual, with the hollow boom of an empty drum.

"Reckon we chased 'em!" he bragged. "Just like damn-Yankees."

"Which did you shoot?" Gal wanted to know.

"Well, I—"

"Sure, sure," Gal drawled. "We savvy. Quit kicking the kid's Injun. He was a chief, and considerable warrior."

"He stinks," Shiloh blustered.

"He ain't alone in that," said Gal.

He was near enough the dead Indian to reach the head-dress, and he let the beaded buckskin headband dangle from one finger while he smoothed the eagle feathers with his other hand. Lila Hogan walked over from her wagon, hips swaying under a threadbare linsey-woolsey dress spotted with ember burns. Her blonde hair was twisted in a knot and her face was dirty. It was a pretty face, but a man would always notice Lila's figure first.

She looked neither at the kid nor the older men. Her eyes, which ordinarily were the dark and vibrant blue of Texas bluebonnets, were merely a blue-black. She said nothing; just sat down and tightened her thin skirt around slender, rounded ankles.

"She ain't scared," the kid thought. "She's—why she's mad! White, frozen mad!"

"What got into her?" Gal thought. "Her pa's a blubbery liar and her ma's trash, but she's a thoroughbred. How that pair ever got her, heaven alone knows—God, lemme help the kid! Please! He's a good kid if he can have a chance."

Aloud Gal said, "Ever fight Injuns before, Shiloh?"

"No. Fought Yankees."

"Sure, sure," Gal drawled. "Me, I've fought both." He indicated the dead Indian on the ground. "This hombre here set out from his village on foot once, and came back with twenty-four horses. That's a coup, and a good one."

Gal's forefinger was on a white eagle's feather on which the outline of a moccasin and twenty-four hoof-marks were painted crudely but clearly in black.

"Didn't even have one horse to start with," he emphasized. "White man afoot on the plains figures he's dead. An Injun figures he's got to make coup or pass in his chips."

"Yeah?" Shiloh grunted.

"Fact. But this"—Gal spoke with respect—"is a grand coup." He touched the topmost feather on the head-dress, which was white, like the other one, but tipped with a spray of crimson feathers. On it was drawn the outline of a man's hand.

"That means he slapped an enemy with his bare hand while the enemy was still armed, and he was still unhurt," Gal explained.

"That takes a lot of nerve, Shiloh. Injuns sure respect courage. They'll take any risk to prove they're brave."

The sweaty man grunted indifferently.

"If he was that brave won't the Injun come back for him?" asked the kid.

"That's right," Gal said. "They'll see he gets proper burial. Means stickin' him in a tree, to them, but they'll be back. Come sundown, I reckon.

"You was figuring on movin' on anyway, weren't you, Shiloh? On account of your women folk?"

"I—"

"Me and Shiloh," cut in a sneering voice, "are pardners. That clear? We're pardners."

CHAPTER II

The Rim of the Grave

LILA drew her bare feet beneath her skirt. The kid looked up with the scowl he could never hide when Cassidy was near. As usual, Bart grinned back at him contemptuously. Bart was young and big and sinewy, with a black beard like silk, and bold black eyes.

"Since ten minutes ago, Pop, if you want to know," Bart announced coolly to Gal. He shifted the Spencer carbine—the only repeating rifle in the outfit—and hitched the Navy Colt on his hip. The Colt that was so much newer and faster than Gal's war-used, cap-and-ball hogleg. Bart was amused. He added jauntily:

"Hey, Lila? Ain't ten minutes right? That your pa and me got to be pards."

"I heard your words," said the girl coldly.

Gal ordered, "Talk straight, Bart."

"He means Ma died," Lila said. "About ten minutes ago."

"Died?" Shiloh yelled. "The Injuns never touched her!"

"Ma died of the inflammation she told you she was suffering," said Lila. "She was dying all night. I held her head in my lap while you were snoring."

"Why didn't you call me?"

"For what? So you could dose her with saleratus again, like you did after supper? You go dig a grave."

Lila leaped to her feet with a fury which grief and self-control could no longer hold in check. She strode to the roan, released the hobbles, and gripped the bridle.

"I'm goin' to drive in a beef," she announced. "You all will want food. Cook, cook, cook! That's all a woman does. Cook—and die."

"Come back here with that pony!" Bart yelled.

Gal said softly, "You heard the lady, Bart. Didn't he, kid?"

The kid, because he was inexperienced, lifted his rifle muzzle an inch. Gal never moved, but his rifle had been lined on Bart from the beginning.

The black-bearded man shrugged, then grinned at the dying soldier.

"I'll help you with *one* grave, pardner," he told Shiloh.

"Let 'em go," Gal whispered. "Kid—hold onto my hand. Did you listen close? You got to make coup, maybe grand coup, kid!"

"Gal, I don't savvy," the kid said desperately. "I'll fight Bart, all right—"

"No, kid, no! Make grand coup, the white man's grand coup. You—"

But Gal had attempted to lift himself to make his advice more emphatic. His fingers were still gripping the kid's, as though still trying to transfer the courage and patience and wisdom he had learned on many battlefields, but his lips were silent.

All brave men count coup. The soldier has his medals and the Indian his eagle feathers. But what is the grand coup for a Texas boy on the Staked Plains who must play a lone hand?

Even the Staked Plains are not perfectly flat. The nesters made camp at the top of a slight rise, and in the morning the kid could see to the horizon in every direction. That was at least a dozen miles, though it seemed like more. In fact, it seemed limitless. A sweep of grass bright green under the May sunlight, with patches of gray mesquite here and there in a random design, and overhead a pitiless blue sky studded with swiftly moving cumulus clouds.

Somewhere, either over the horizon or hidden in an invisible draw, the Comanches lay concealed. They had left no sign and, equally significant, there was not one horse from the cavvy in sight, although cattle grazed everywhere. Yesterday fourteen nesters had driven two thousand head. Today three men and a girl were left to share it all.

"I'd swap five hundred head for a pony," the kid thought. "Gee, an hombre could make a good trade. Bart's countin' the stock already, damn his guts."

HATRED and envy of the bearded cowpuncher made the kid feel sick. He was honest enough to admit the feeling was largely envy. Bart could lick him with one hand and best him with a gun certain-sure. But he didn't have to rub the fact in the kid's face by strutting about the camp the way he was doing. There were ten graves to dig. Shiloh and Fred were both busy, but Bart was prancing up and down near the campfire, where Lila was frying the steaks. He kept grinning like a polecat, and—drat her!—that time she smiled back at him.

With a savage sweep of his shovel the kid marked the earth for Gal's grave, laid the Enfield musket close to what would be the edge, and began to dig. He piled the earth on the side toward Bart without thinking consciously of what he was doing. He was waist-deep when the idea hit him—sudden and sickening as a kick in the belly.

"Bart's going to plug you, so—"

It seemed to the kid as though the earth spun, then slowed to a gentle stop. He was standing in Gal's grave with his mouth open, and the shovel resting on loose earth which was as high as his shoulders. He realized he hadn't moved for some time, because Shiloh and Lila and Bart were standing up, staring at him. Bart's thumbs were hooked in his gun-belt, but the kid's rifle wasn't a foot from his hand. He had cover; Bart, none.

"What's wrong?" Lila called.

"Nothing," the kid answered.

"Fry is ready. Come and get it."

"Ain't hungry," he shouted. His mouth was full of cotton, and his stomach burned. "Never get a better chance. Plug him before he plugs you."

Lila dropped her cooking fork and ran toward him.

"Go 'way, I tell you! I'm all right!" Despite himself the kid's voice slipped up into falsetto.

"You ain't neither, kid!" She was at the edge of the grave now, still directly between Bart and himself. Her eyes were the bright blue of bluebonnets in noon sunlight, with flecks of light as though dew lingered in the petals. Fred had always worshipped her in dumb silence. He had never seen her as pretty as she was now, though, and she wasn't trying to be pretty. Her lips were moving as though she were saying one word over and over again, rapidly.

"What?" Fred asked.

"I said, 'The fry's ready. Come on.' You look sick."

"Ain't going till I get Gal buried."

"I'll help you, kid."

"Don't want your help. Go 'way."

"Freddy's mad."

"My name ain't Freddy. It's Fred."

"Since when? Nobody never called you Fred. Nobody's give you that much notice."

"You damn slut, I'll show you!"

He vaulted from the grave meaning to hit her, and hit her hard. He thought she would run, or try to dodge, but she did not move except to straighten and lift her

What's in a Name?

THE only reason why the Mississippi wasn't named the Rio Grande River is because De Soto didn't get his way in regard to the matter. He definitely preferred the latter and tried his best to make it stick. Father Marquette called it the Immaculate Conception, but most people, it seems, preferred the title that the Algonquin Indians used, which means "the great long river" as well as "the gathering of all the waters."

—*Mark Knight*

chin. His shoulder struck her knee, but she was so firmly braced that he lost his balance in the loose earth and slipped back ignominiously. The blue eyes blazed excitement.

"I aim to say a prayer over your uncle," she said slowly and loudly. "He was a good man, and he liked me."

"The grave ain't deep enough," the kid mumbled.

"Then dig. I'll wait." She seated herself, drawing her skirt around her ankles. "I said a prayer over Ma, but I don't reckon God listened to me. I was too mad. I said prayer words thinking of hell fire. I can pray for your uncle."

"I wasn't really fixing to hit you, Lila."

"You was, too. Don't lie. Or maybe you don't know what you were doin'. You stopped digging all of a sudden and didn't act like yourself none whatever— Help me to slide Gal down, Freddy."

"My name ain't—"

"'Our Father, Who art in Heaven—'"

SHE said the Lord's Prayer, and stood aside while he filled the grave. The kid was afraid he was going to cry, and afraid she would see the tears. However, she did not lift her eyes. When she spoke it was under her breath.

"Two horses wouldn't pull a wagon fast enough. The Injuns would just jump us again a few miles further back."

"That's right."

"Bart ain't true pardners with nobody, man or woman."

"Huh?"

"You heard me. God Almighty forgive me, but I'm ashamed of my own father— You going to try to walk down a horse, like Gal said?"

"Seems like I'd just walk all day and not get near nothing."

"Seems that way to me, too," Lila sighed. "Kid—don't go loco again."

"What?"

"Killing was on your face, kid. Bart was plumb set for you. I—I didn't taunt you out of meanness, kid. Come on, now. The fry really is ready."

Indeed, the two older men had finished eating, and were sitting under Bart's wagon, which afforded the only shade. That might be customary after dinner, but the positions they had chosen were not. Shiloh was behind the hind wheel, and Bart behind the forewheel, a good eight feet apart, and each with a rifle handy.

"You figure I'll get to eat that fry?" asked the kid.

So this was what fear was, he thought. This hollow tightness of chest and stomach. Now that the moment had come it was not as bad as his anticipation. He walked toward the wagon, kicking at the clumps of grass. A coup was not sufficient. He must make the grand coup.

"Hey, Bart," he hailed, "let's saddle up. Give me the gray and you take the roan. If we can't raid the cavvy, we can rope a stray."

"*I* don't aim to lose my hair, kid. In fact, this layout suits me."

"But we need more horses!"

"Me and my pardner ain't afoot. If you don't like the layout, rustle."

"The Comanches will be back. You'll need me."

"Your single-shooter?" Bart demanded. "Or your bright ideas? You cracked down on me once. Now it's my turn. You can draw, or get. I hope you try to draw, but I figure you for a runny-nosed, yellow-bellied coward."

The kid would be shot if he made a move, and he knew it. But shame was making him see red.

"Here, catch!" called Lila shrilly. A steak wrapped in burlap sailed through the air. He caught it mechanically.

"Lila, you mind your own business!" Shiloh bellowed.

"Ain't that feedin' menfolks?" the girl snapped. "So long, kid. Here's a water bottle."

He felt a little less ashamed, able to meet Bart's eye.

"I aim to drag that Indian I shot along with me."

"No you don't!" Shiloh mouthed.

"Shut up," said Bart. "Let the yellow-belly wear himself out dragging dead meat if he craves to."

CHAPTER III

Buzzard on the Branch

BART'S insult didn't bother Fred at all. The knot was out of his stomach. He was tired, deadly tired, but at least he was not playing another man's game. For an instant he had seen uncertainty on Bart's face. That heartened him. Bart didn't have the nerve to walk out afoot where Comanches lurked.

Where the chief was, the tribe would come. Gal, who knew Indians, had said so. And when Indians came they would be riding horses.

"Fred—good luck, Fred," Lila called.

He had always admired her, but yesterday it had been for the prettiness of her face, or the vision of her figure with the dress pulled tight across breast or thigh. Now as he looked back and saw her cleaning a frying pan with sand, her face turned from him, it was without being conscious of her body.

He had nothing to say, no need for speech. It was a new feeling. That was Lila—someone who was with him and would be with him, even though he left camp and she remained.

He found he was steadier. The green circle of grass ceased to be a prison and a trap. It became an expanse of grass, dotted gray with mesquite, with Indians hidden somewhere whom he must outwit and outfight. His chances were not too good, but neither were Lila's. He found he could admit that without sweating about it. He had wondered what it would be like to fight for his life, to kill a man, to be afraid—and to be in love.

"None of it's like I thought," he told himself. "I don't feel different, but I am."

Meanwhile there was a dead Indian to carry. The corpse outweighed Fred by forty pounds, and it was essential to get far enough from the camp to flank any Comanches who might attack it.

He solved the problem by making a travois out of thin hickory strips taken from the wagon bows. It was about two o'clock when he finished making the rude sled. He planned to get three or four miles from camp before sundown, leave the body in plain sight on the prairie, and hide near it in the mesquite. If the Indians dismounted to pick up the body he'd open fire. After the fight, he might be able to catch a stray horse.

The plan was poor, and he hadn't dragged the Indian chief's body half a mile before the behavior of the buzzards indicated that there was not even the faintest chance of success. The dirty black birds would slant down toward the body, then flap away. But though they lighted frequently on the prairie, there was one particular clump of mesquite which no buzzard would touch. Three times one started to alight there. Each time it flapped off, cawing.

Any plainsman could interpret that sign. Something alive which buzzards considered dangerous was in the brush. That "something" must be the Indian boy who had retreated last from the attack, limping too badly to overtake the rest of the war party.

"I ain't the only kid tryin' to steal a horse," Fred reflected grimly. "That one left his knife behind, but he sure enough collected himself a rifle. A kind of funny-lookin'—"

Memory clicked. Funny looking? The hell it was! That was a Henry—the newest, best, most effective repeating rifle made. The rifle every Texan coveted, the weapon that would do for the man afoot what the Colt had done for the cowboy, that would make single-shot weapons as obsolete as the bow and arrow.

Bart had a repeater, but his gun was only a Spencer—shorter in range, not chambering half as many cartridges, and not as accurate as the Henry. If the Indian were any kind of shot he could put up a pretty even fight against all three white men right now. Once darkness fell, his greater skill in taking cover would give him a decided edge.

"Damn!" said Fred disgustedly. Now he would have to do Bart a favor, and even

though he was doing it for Lila's sake the necessity griped him. It would be nice to see biggety Bart, all swollen-pup proud of his weapons, go up against that Henry. Maybe Bart would be so swell-headed he would try to shoot it out.

"Hell, I'm thinking like a kid again," Fred muttered disgustedly, and began to wave his arms to attract attention from the camp.

LILA was on her feet instantly. Fred made the Indian sign for "Comanche" over and over again, and pointed with his forefinger at the mesquite. At last she understood, for she talked with Bart, and the cowboy threw a saddle on the roan and came loping across the flat.

He stopped, however, a long rifle shot from Fred.

"I'll cover you!" he bellowed. "Go in and smoke him out."

"Go in yourself!" Fred shouted indignantly.

"I'll give you the gray if you get him."

"You're a liar!"

Bart swung arrogantly out of the saddle. He bellied down in the grass and fired. The bullet hit about twenty feet to Fred's left. It was all so quick and unexpected the kid only stared. Bart's second shot stung him with flying earth.

"Go in, I said! Or I'll aim the next one at you!"

"Tinhorn!" yelled the kid. "Yellowbelly!"

But he whirled toward the mesquite. Bart wasn't bluffing; Bart had wanted an excuse to plug him. Better to fight the Indian, because that would be matching nerve and guts with Bart. He and Bart were in a gunfight, though neither of them would pull trigger.

"Yellow, am I? I show yuh!"

He gripped his old Enfield and advanced slowly on the gray-green mesquite. He was afraid, but fear wasn't going to stop him, and that certainty filled him with exultation. Gal had done this in his time. At Gettysburg Gal had charged all across the valley and up the long hill, up and up toward the stone wall where the Yankees had lain with leveled muskets. The Yankees had shot Gal down, too. He'd lain where he fell until they took him prisoner.

"But we got across the wall, kid. We got amongst 'em with the bayonet." Gal's voice was in the kid's ears. "We were good enough to win, only there weren't enough of us."

One man was enough here. "Keep your nerve, Fred. Keep your mouth shut. Never let Bart guess the Injun's got a repeater. He thinks he's handed you a cold deck. He's going to spur in and finish things off after you and the Injun have emptied your guns. Only the Injun's gun won't be empty— If you can get him, Fred, you can get to his gun in time. Watch close."

The branches of the mesquite tore at the kid's legs. No use to belly down. He couldn't out-crawl a Comanche.

"Hope you can glimpse his eyes as he pulls trigger and beat him to the shot," he told himself. "Shoot and jump for that Henry-gun!"

A flash and a puff of smoke and a stunning blow all came together. Fred found himself on his back in the mesquite, powder smoke floating above him. He was hit, but he felt no pain. He just couldn't move. His right hand lay on his belt, with sweat gleaming on the back of it, and yet he couldn't move a finger. Had he been hit in the backbone, like Gal? With frantic terror he tried to wiggle his toes. They moved. He saw his whole foot lift from the brush, and relaxed, unable to get up, but mentally alert.

He heard the pound of hoofs and the crash as the roan hit the brush. Bart, flattened to the pony's back, reins and rifle in his left hand, six-gun poised in his right, all but rode over the kid. On the bearded face was the sneering grin of the cold killer—when the crack of the Henry came like a whip.

Bart dropped rifle and six-gun and slid after them, like a bag, limp, face-first. The shot must have drilled through his brain. For an instant there was only the crashing sound made by the galloping horses. Then

came the triumphant scalp-whoop of the Comanche.

With all his will Fred tried to draw a revolver, but he could only manage to drag his hand off his body. He could feel the gun-butt, yet until the shock of the wound passed, he could not grasp it. The Comanche was erect, hand clapped on his empty knife sheath. Fred had never seen more pride on a face. The Indian wanted Bart's scalp, but even more, he wanted the horse. He turned and limped away. Far off, the roan snorted.

"Don't let the reins tangle in the bush," Fred prayed.

HE COULD visualize that chase, even though he could not lift his head to follow it. The roan would let the Indian come fairly close, then snort and trot away —not too far. Cowponies seemed to know when they had the upper hand. Nevertheless, when a man set out to catch a horse he invariably caught it.

From behind the kid hoofs drummed on the grass. He was able to work the old hogleg out of the holster now, but that was all. The horse—it must be the gray —swept by, but someone was pushing through the mesquite.

"It's Lila!" she called. "Fred, where are you? Answer, Fred!"

"Here—just creased some."

She crouched beside him, panting. "Creased nothing. It's plumb through your chest!"

"Get Bart's repeater—quick."

"No need yet. The Comanche's out on the flats. Pa's heading off the roan.

The crack of the Henry sounded, followed by the heavier boom of an Enfield. Lila went pale. There were freckles on her forehead. Fred had never noticed them before.

"Is your pa hit?"

Bleakly she said, "No," and began to tear the kid's shirt for bandage.

"Then what?"

"Reckon you might as well know, Fred. Pa's crawfished. He's buzzin' round, but the Injun keeps close to the roan." She rose, walked to Bart, and returned with the Spencer carbine and the gun-belt.

"The Injun's got a Henry," Fred began defensively.

"Don't you make excuses for my own flesh and blood to me," she blazed.

"Well, he has."

"Yeah, and you knew it," she declared. "Fred—cough, and then spit. —Huh! You didn't bring up blood."

"I don't feel so bad. Only weak. You're calling me 'Fred.'

"Reckon you ain't a kid no more."

"That all? Who saddled the gray?"

She shut her eyes and shook her head. Piteously she said, "Don't, Fred. I did, but I can't go no further. I'm ashamed. I'm like pa, I guess. I can't go riding right in and take what comes."

"What's the matter with you? You're the swellest girl in Texas, and—"

"Shut up!" she said, with such agony of tone that he did. "Fred, it's no use. Pa's giving up. He's going to ride back pronto. That leaves one horse for three. How long you figure Pa'll stay?"

"Till sundown, maybe."

"Maybe." She looked across the prairie, and her face was as cold and sharp and colorless as the face in the moon. "Fred, I'm scared of dying. I did slap a hull on the gray and come here to help you, but sitting and waiting to be scalped— I can't face it. I'm scared worse of what the Comanches would do to me first."

"You ain't talking sense. I love you, and—"

She kissed him.

"You don't do that like you meant it. Try it again."

"I got no right to, Fred. If I loved you right I'd stay behind and nurse you."

"You're loco! You go with your pa after help."

"And be back in a week—maybe," she said. "Don't you call me loco, Fred." It was her old manner, but the fire was gone, leaving only the ashes of bitterness. "I just ain't brave enough. I keep thinkin' of Comanches holdin' me in their dirty hands. I want to stay, Fred. I'll pray for the courage."

"I won't let you stay."

"Don't say words, Fred. You ain't wounded mortal, but you're going to get fever. You need me."

CHAPTER IV

The White Grand Coup

IF SHILOH HOGAN had only kept his mouth shut, the time of indecision would have been easier for both Fred and Lila. Shiloh had flinched and circled when he should have charged. All his sweat and alibis and bluster couldn't rub off that fact. Of course, he protested, if he had rushed the Comanche might have two horses now instead of one. Of course, the Indian would have shot the gray, and then shot Shiloh, rather than let him close in. And so on, and so on.

It all might be so, but what of it?

Lila made her father carry Fred as far back as the wagon camp, where he would have shelter and food. She postponed the moment of departure by unnecessary care for the kid's immediate comfort. She reloaded the Spencer and Bart's Colt, baked biscuits and made coffee; even poured the grounds from the coffee pot so the brew would not become bitter by standing.

She moved like a sleepwalker. All three knew—and this they did not say—that to attempt to carry Fred on a travois would jar his wound open and kill him within a mile. She did not pretend she was leaving because it was sensible.

It was sensible. Cowardice often is. Fred could grin as though he wanted her to go, but he couldn't fool her.

The horizon began to climb over the sun. The time had come when she had done the last little useless thing. She stooped outside the wagon wheel, and the spokes were bars between them.

"Maybe there's another party of settlers right behind us," she said.

"Sure. We ain't the only Texans hunting grass."

"I'll bring help quick."

"Shucks, you're doin' what I want. *Hasta la revisita!*"

She flinched as though he had hit her, ran to the gray, and mounted behind her father. She had to hold on with both arms. Their shadow as they departed cut across Fred as though it were the shadow of the blade of some huge scythe.

When they had gone he lay, guns handy, for what might have been an hour. He felt stronger, exhilarated. He suspected it was the temporary stimulation of fever, but he welcomed it. For out on the flats, where he had left the dead chief, a fire had been kindled. A tiny yellow star, and the smell of smoldering buffalo chips on the wind. From time to time the star winked, when an Indian stepped in front of the blaze. The boy with the Henry and the white leather medicine bag was back. The whole war party might be.

"I'll bet it was his first fight, too," Fred thought. "You've done right smart, White Leather. Killing Bart and getting his horse—that's a coup, and a big one. Reckon I can count coup on Bart, too. That got Lila away safe. Maybe it's a grand coup, gettin' her away."

He would have liked to think it was, but he couldn't. The grand coup for an Indian was so definite. To strike an armed man with the bare hand. The acme of egotistical foolhardiness. Utterly reckless, but proving nothing. Something to boast of.

"Bragging is Injun nature, not white," he thought. "And even an Injun don't count a grand coup unless he gets way safe. If I had saved Lila, that would be a grand coup. Just like a soldier gets the highest medal for something that saves his regiment. Being as he ain't going to brag, it don't matter if he don't pull through himself. But I ain't saved Lila. I've just turned her loose. She's plumb ashamed of herself. It don't matter none that she shouldn't be. She ain't mean or easy satisfied. She ain't asking favors."

Fred reached for coffee. As he drank, there was a clink of metal from within the pot. Investigating, he fished out a ring. The darkness had become intense, but

from its shape, this was a wedding ring. Mrs. Hogan's wedding ring, left by Lila where he would be sure to find it. Her most valuable possession, and the symbol of eternal faith. Not given to him, but left for him to find and hold. There was a promise here, but he couldn't figure out the meaning clearly. He reckoned that a man never could savvy a woman's notions.

HE HAD been watchful, yet despite the abnormal alertness caused by fever the Comanche was at the tail of the wagon before Fred perceived him. Even then it was movement of a figure bellied against the ground, caught out of the tail of Fred's eye, which warned him. When he looked straight at the spot he could see nothing but darkness. He kept his head faced forward, as though he had really seen nothing. But inch by inch, at long intervals, the movement persisted. Between the big rear wheels. Now as far as the brake. Now up to the front wheels.

"It's his game, but I'll play." Fred thought. "If he's alone, it's from choice."

The impulse to blaze away with a six-gun was all but overpowering; but the Indian might also have fired. Since he hadn't, he was trying for the grand coup.

"Like me. White Leather. I'll copper your play."

Exactly how far was an arm's length in that darkness? The Comanche would slap with one hand, and then pull trigger. Despite the utmost power of his will Fred found himself holding his breath. The Comanche must know he was neither dead, nor asleep. The coup would go to the better judge of distance.

Suddenly Fred swung, not with his bare hand, but clubwise with the Colt. The barrel smacked bone. Instantly he rolled onto the Indian, fumbling for the throat, smelling buffalo fat and pine gum. It was White Leather, and he had been knocked cold. That five and a half inches of extra reach given by the Colt had made the difference. A few more blows would bash in the Indian's skull, all without a sound.

"*Will* you stop thinking like a kid?" Fred muttered disgustedly. "*He's* the one who came for a chance to brag."

There was no sound or movement. White Leather seemed to have come alone. Fred groped for the Henry, and slowly levered the shells from the magazine. He would have given all he owned for the weapon, even the five hundred cows he had offered to trade for a horse that morning.

But a grown man can't grab for what he wants, like a kid for candy. He made sure there was one shell in the rifle, then splashed coffee in the Indian's face. The Comanche groaned. Fred shook him to speed the return of consciousness then, lifting the Henry and his six-gun, he fired both. The Henry first.

White Leather caught his breath with a sharp hiss. Fred jammed the hot muzzle of the revolver against the Indian's ribs.

"Fire your rifle," he ordered.

The Comanche tried to twist the muzzle toward him, but Fred held it. There was only a sharp *click* of a falling hammer; a guttural exclamation of dismay.

"Take gun," Fred ordered. "Vamose muy pronto."

"No savvy!"

"*Habla Espanol?*

"*Si.*"

"*Bueno.*" Fred went on in Spanish, slowly, as to a child, but with dig in the ribs with the six-gun to emphasize every word.

"You came to make the grand coup."

"*Si.*"

"You did not make the grand coup. I saw you too soon. But you fired first. Your tribe has heard the shots. Your rifle, my pistol. You go back and tell your tribe you have killed me."

"I take rifle?"

"Sure you take the rifle. How could I keep your rifle if I'm dead? You've got to be a good liar. Why, you got so close to me that when I shot at you I cracked down my six-gun alongside of your head. That's how you got that lump. Make a good talk and you can count coup. But if you can't talk your tribe out of com-

ing back here I'll put up one hell of a fight, and they'll know you're a two-tongued liar. You count extra coup—or you get laughed at plenty. Savvy?"

"*Si.*"

"Well, anyhow you ain't dumb," Fred said in English.

"I Wolf Clan. You Wolf Clan, meb-beso? No shoot this morning."

"Sure. I'm Wolf Clan," Fred said. "Anyway we're in the same boat." He gave a heartier dig with the revolver, and ordered, "Vamose pronto."

WHITE LEATHER vamosed, like a limping shadow. Fred watched the fire, and listened. Vanity, that was the key to an Indian. For a time, the fire winked as men crossed and recrossed before the blaze. Then it burned like a yellow eye that slowly dimmed to red, as an hour passed. The Comanches had their war chief. They were returning to bury him, with scalps and many horses, and a new young warrior who had counted two coups.

Gone? But there was a sound! Feet that stumbled, a figure that came toward the wagon erect, visible against the sky.

"Lila!"

"It's me, Fred. I made it!" She crawled under the wagon and took him in her arms, almost fiercely. "Let 'em come. You ain't facing them alone."

"What do you mean, you made it?"

"I made myself let go. I fell off the horse. I was too scared to stay, but I could make myself fall. I don't know why, Fred. It's just so."

"You mean your pa didn't come back."

"Oh, he came back. I told him I'd left Ma's ring, and I was going to have it. He wouldn't ride back for that. Don't you understand, Fred? I wanted back. I tied myself to you with everything I could."

"You reckon it would be right for you to wear the ring?"

"Of course it would be right. I saw the Injun fire. They'll be back at dawn, likely?"

"They won't be back. Honest. I'm plumb sure, Lila."

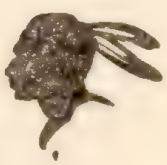
She breathed deeply, twice. Her hand stroked his forehead.

"Burning with fever," she said. "Put on the ring. Fred. On my fourth finger."

"There's food and water, but no horse—"

"Hush, Fred. We've all that's needful. Lay back and sleep. A horse is only a coup. Gal said so."

HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW YOUR WEST?



Counting each question as worth 20 points, you'll really be ridin' high, wide and handsome if you can get all five and score 100. If you rate 80, with four correct answers, you're still a top hand on anyone's ranch. Three, or 60, entitles you to a place at the grub pile, but less than that, you're a tenderfoot. Let's go! Answers are on page 124—if you MUST look!

1. In what manner did Chief Two Guns White Calf become perhaps the best-known Indian in the United States?
2. Name the only western river that runs and empties into the north.
3. The saguaro cactus is the official flower of what Western state?
4. Beside smoke signals, what other method did Indians use to communicate at a distance?
5. What noted American suggested the first official exploration of our West?

Sandy wrenched the gun from Yates' hand

Trouble at Bobcat Springs

By GIFF CHESHIRE

Old Rad couldn't resist meddling with his ramrod son

THE GRIZZLED man in the rocking chair on the ranchhouse porch straightened up, with his head cocked to one side—listening. What he heard at first was a mere tickling sensation on his eardrums. It swelled steadily, changing into sound—riotous, reckless, ridiculous sound it was—issuing from the mouth of Sandy, his son.

Rad Prosser settler back in the chair and the rocker was motionless, after that. But the stiffness did not leave the older man's body. The caterwauling emerged from the willows along the creek, where Sandy's horse minced along with loosened reins. The brainless critter actually

seemed to like Sandy's incessant music. The rider had both hands cupped to his mouth, and even at the distance Rad knew that there would be a dreamy, far-away expression on his face.

Look at him, Rad snorted to himself. Not a care in the world, and him a man grown and trouble crowding him hard . . .

The horse came to a stop below the porch. Without looking at his father, Sandy took the mouth organ from his mouth. He gave it a swing to clear it of moisture but failed to drop the dratted thing into his pocket. Then he looked at Rad and grinned.

"Howdy, Dad. How you feeling?"

Rad glowered at him darkly. "What's this I hear," he demanded, "about Noah Yates helping himself to water at Bobcat Springs?"

Sandy looked at the harmonica, rubbed its shiny tin on his sleeve, then looked at it again. The question had caught him off-guard and jolted him. "Well, I guess he's using 'em, all right," he said.

"You give him permission?" Rad bawled.

Sandy shook his head.

Rad turned polite, which was a sure sign of bad weather. "Man could say he just helped himself, huh?" he murmured.

"Well, Rad," Sandy answered, "Calico Creek's drier than it's been in years, they tell me. It's got Yates pinched."

Rad hit the chair arm with a balled fist. "Don't dodge me, drat it!" he yelled. "I don't care if he's pinched or unpinched! What I want to know is he starting to tramp on us like I hear he has some of the others! If you give him permission to water on Bobcat, he ain't tramplin' us. But if you never did, he is. Can you think straight enough to tell me which?"

SANDY'S cheeks began to color, but he met his father's eyes all through that explosion. He kept himself so still Rad almost regretted that he had not held his tongue, hard as that would have been. He didn't understand Sandy and never had. Rad had recognized the odds against him all through the years in which he had trained his son to take over the Big P. He had thought for a long while that the makings were there, in spite of Sandy's soft-hearted, easy-going nature.

Except for complexion, Sandy was his spitting image, or the image of what Rad had been a few years back—tall, wide and hard-fleshed. But the rest, temperament, had come from Sandy's mother, things a man could appreciate and even reverence in a woman: gentleness, compassion, and a disposition to avoid the unpleasant as long as possible. Nonetheless, Rad had pounded an education into Sandy. The boy, or man now, knew how to use his fists and how to use his gun. He knew how to run steers and derive a profit from it. He knew how to handle an overly-aggressive neighbor like Noah Yates, to boot. Yet—there was that incessant, infernal mouth organ, and this business of Yates taking water without asking for it.

Rad Prosser wasn't an old man yet. But a bout of rheumatic fever two years before had left him a wasted remnant of his former self, and brought flat orders from the medico that he retire completely from ranch work. Heart, the doctor said, which often was a complication from that kind of sickness. With enough rest Rad Prosser might be a well man again; otherwise, and he was as good as a dead one. "But," the doctor had complained recently, "you worry harder than you'd work, if I let you. You've got a first-rate crew and a fine son, blast you. Cut it out . . ."

When Sandy didn't answer the questions Rad had asked, his father forced himself into a milder attitude. He said, "It ain't a question of whether or not Yates needs the water. He should have come to us before he helped himself to Bobcat. Since he didn't, you've got to put a stop to it. Otherwise he'll run over you every chance he gets."

Sandy shook his head. "I already told him to mind his manners next time," he said. "But I don't rightly think we should stop him, seeing Calico's so short. We don't need Bobcat, ourselves."

"And Yates has always coveted 'em!" Rad said, losing his temper again. "Him

and me had it out once when you were knee-high to a prairie dog! I got a feeling he's out to try it again!"

"What can he do?" Sandy asked. "Bobcat's on our land."

"Claimed range," Rad snorted, "but still open! Yates never did respect custom, but so far he's respected Big P. Don't let him lose that respect, or you'll be in more hot water than you ever dreamed could pop up. I know. That man thinks I'm done for and you're a push-over, and he's fixing to make the most of it."

"Now, Rad," Sandy said patiently, "Yates hasn't done a thing but use Bobcat, and he's got a good reason for doing it. I don't see why we need to get exercised about that. Yates ain't given me cause to throw him off the Bobcat flat, and I don't think he aims to. Just you slack off, now, and take it easy." Sandy lifted the mouth harp to his lips to blow a few cheerful notes.

"Put that blasted thing in your pocket!" Rad yelled. Then he slumped suddenly and said, "No, go ahead and blow your brains out on it. You could, and never plug up a hole!"

The stains showed on Sandy's cheeks again. Then the boy grinned. "Look, Rad," he said pleasantly. "When you turned Big P over to me, you told me it was mine to run. Are you forgetting that? I know how hard it's been sometimes for you to keep out of it. So far you've been fine. But I still figure the way you did, at first. To run this outfit at all, I got to do it my way. I don't see cause to lay it on the line for Yates. So I ain't going to lay it on the line." He pulled his horse around. He wasn't angry, but he had left Rad no doubt that he meant what he said. As he rode around the house, the infernal harmonica cut loose again.

Rad rolled a cigarette and lighted it in preoccupation. It was a sore, hard thing to be laid up in middle-age. Sandy hadn't said the half of it about the difficulty of keeping hands-off of the ranch affairs. But Rad had done it in routine matters. This thing wasn't routine, but an ugly sign that Rad knew would turn into a deadly business if Noah Yates wasn't brought up hard.

When he crossed to the cookshack at supper time, Rad's spirits lifted somewhat. Big P's eight riders were already there eating. But the atmosphere of the big room was different, this evening. It wasn't the cheerful, noisy place it usually was. There was little talk or banter going on. Rad wasn't oblivious to the quick look of interest a man or two gave him as he stepped in—a look of curiosity, he thought, and maybe of hope. Every man jack was wondering if he was going to keep on sitting on his hands now that he knew about Noah Yates. They had all heard how, that afternoon, Bernie Morts had dropped an idle remark to Rad that had roused the Old Man's suspicion and caused him to worm the truth out of Bernie.

BERNIE MORTS was a puncher who gave his full support to his boss. At first Rad had believed the man really had let his tongue silp. But now Rad wondered. There wasn't a man in the cookshack—save Sandy Prosser —who wasn't champing at the bit in his eagerness to hurl Yates' defiance back at him.

Rad's hopes were jacked up another notch later that night. Dusk ran in soft and peaceful as it ever was, and there wasn't so much as a peep out of Sanday's harmonica, though it was his ingrained habit to sit on the big front porch with Rad and blow the insides out of the thing.

The point had been reached in Rad's convalescence where the doctor allowed him an hour or two of riding each day. Rad looked forward to it all through a sleepless night because he wanted a look at Bobcat flat for himself. After breakfast, the next morning, he saddled the easy-gaited old mare he used and started out. He took the direction opposite to the way to Bobcat flat because he didn't want anybody to divine his intentions. But, once out of sight of the ranchhouse, he cut a circle.

Rad's devious course, two hours later, brought him on top the low bench on the

west side of the flat and not a great distance from the artesian springs that bubbled there. It had been his intention to make his way down and see for himself the sign left by Yates' steers. But even before Rad came to the edge of the rim he heard a heavy chunking sound in the distance. It aroused him but also moved him to caution. So, short of the rim, he swung out of the saddle, left his horse out of sight, and made way to the edge on foot.

Anger jolted through him like a thunder-bolt when he saw his suspicions confirmed. A wagon and team stood beyond the springs, the wagon loaded with juniper fence posts. Three men were there, two driving posts with a maul, the third watching. And the idler was Noah Yates, himself. Unbelievable but undeniably, they were fencing Bobcat Springs!

Every instinct in Rad cried for action. Out of old habit he always wore a gun on his rides, on the look-out for predatory animals. There was an acid hunger in him to scare the bejeepers out of those three men and put pause in Noah Yates with a few well-placed slugs. But a deterrent rose up through the red curtain of rage. It was Sandy's problem, not his, for on this moment hung the whole future of Big P. This was a break, Rad realized. Sandy couldn't blind himself now to Yates' aggressive intentions. He could no longer claim that there wasn't cause to lay it on the line for the man.

Rad squirmed backward from the rim, beginning to grin in a fierce, wild way. He wasn't even going to tell Sandy about this. He wouldn't throw another ounce of influence into Sandy's decision until or unless it became impossible not to interfere.

Yet that day passed, and then another, with nothing disturbing Rad's boredom on the ranch house porch. Riders came and went on routine chores, their faces showing plainly that Noah Yates' fencing job had not gone undetected. Sandy took to avoiding Rad and—though Rad wouldn't have believed it possible—he was already back to blowing breath and brains out through the infernal mouth organ. It was all Rad could do to stay in his chair each time he heard its merry lilt.

Rad waited a week and, because he could bear inaction no longer, finally pointed his morning ride toward Bobcat flat. Determined to keep the promise he had made himself about keeping hands off until the last possible moment, he again made his approach a cautious one. But this time there was no need for concealment, for Yates' men were gone. When he reached the rim, he saw that the fencing job had been completed. The springs were inclosed, and there was, he found when he rode on down, a padlock on the gate. Noah Yates not only had helped himself to Big P water, he had possessed the colossal gall to deny Big P's own steers use of the springs, should the water be needed.

But there still were no Yates cows on the flats. They were being brought in to water and then were being taken back. But Yates' design was clear. The springs were artesian, typical of the region, boiling up from a tilted water table, running a short distance on the surface, then disappearing again into a sink. Big P had dug and concreted a tank that was kept fresh and cool. But it was only reserve water. So, in fencing the springs, Yates had denied the use of the whole flat to Big P. He meant to latch onto the whole open section, and Rad didn't need any plainer evidence of a range hog on the move.

Rad kept to the saddle, his anger a flame consuming his reason. The fence was only barbed wire. Cutters and a catch-rope could quickly demolish it. That was what Big P should have done the day it was discovered here. Rad knew that was what he ought to do now, and was sorely tempted. But again he managed to remind himself that Sandy had to face up to this voluntarily. But Sandy wouldn't—at least not until Yates crowded him yet again.

Suddenly Rad saw how he could help that crowding along. With a wicked grin, he plucked his gun. His first shot demol-

ished the padlock. Dismounting, Rad tossed the lock into the tank. Next he threw the gate wide open. Thereafter he rode home as secretly as he had ridden out. Before the day was over, he knew, one of Yates' riders would find that forced gate. Yates would be forced to make another and stronger move. Then certainly Sandy would act.

IT WAS close to noon when Rad reached home, and the punchers had come in for their dinner. He prided himself on a poker face, but he must have let something show for he saw more than one man fling him a quick second look of puzzlement. Rad put up his horse, washed at the bunkhouse bench, and walked over to the cookshack into which the crew, by then, had disappeared.

Sandy was already eating, and Rad slid into the place at the other end of the table from him. Looking up, Sandy gave his father a long, close look.

"All right," he said. "You've been up to Bobcat flat again. What did you do up there?"

Guilt whipped Rad's surprise into anger —born of a caught-kid realization that he hadn't been as elusive on those visits as he had supposed.

"Why," he said with elaborate meekness, "somebody's fenced and padlocked Bobcat. So I was scared even to try and water my cayuse."

Sandy flung an annoyed look at Bernie Morts. "You been blabbing again, Bernie?" he asked.

Outrage climbed in Bernie's face. "I never blabbed the first time!" he exploded. "I made a slip, and Rad drug it out of me, the way I told you, Sandy."

"I found out about the fence myself," Rad cut in coldly. Every eye at the table was riveted on him. He took them all in with one scornful sweep of his gaze. "And what is this yellow-bellied calf outfit going to do about it?" he asked Sandy.

Sandy had the serenity to fork up food, chew and swallow it before he answered. "As long as I'm running Big P, Rad," he said, "it's doing nothing at all."

"Nothing!" Rad roared.

"That's what I said. We don't need Bobcat this year. Noah Yates does."

"You chuckleheaded lamebrain!" Rad bawled. "Don't you know that, with them springs fenced, Yates is the only outfit who ever could use Bobcat flat? To say nothing of the sheer insolence of it! Or the fact that, encouraged in one thing, he'll try another!"

Sandy lifted a placating hand. "Take it easy, Rad. When I need Bobcat again, I'll use it and the springs."

"Hell's bells, you might not ever need it!"

"There you are," Sandy said. "You've knocked your own argument in the head." His voice was very quiet, very soft, and very final.

Suddenly the strength ran out of Rad. He decided to say nothing about having shot the padlock off the gate up there. He knew from the expressions on the faces of the men that every one of them would obey him if he gave orders of his own. But if he did that, Sandy's days on Big P were over. Rad knew that, didn't want it. He choked down an excuse for a meal and even than was alone in the cookshack by the time he had finished.

He was sick at heart when he returned to take up his wearing vigil on the shady ranch house porch. He watched the crew ride out once more on routine work. All the years he had put in on Big P seemed to march before him, and proud and shining years they now seemed. But it wasn't the menace to the ranch that disturbed him the most, because in the showdown he could step in and deal with Noah Yates as he had once before.

Rad's misery grew from Sandy and the now plain cowardice in him. There was no other excuse for such complete submissiveness. Even with one of the best crews in the basin to back him, Sandy was afraid of Yates. So Rad had his own decision to make, at last. Since Sandy would ultimately inherit the ranch, should he let the boy rack on in his own jelly-bellied way or to take things out of his hands?

All through a long, hot afternoon Rad

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(See page 118)

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2. The Red River of the North is the boundary between North Dakota and Minnesota and runs north and empties into Lake Winnipeg.
3. Arizona. There is even a National Monument dedicated to these giant cacti.
4. By moving his pony in various directions, much like a signal flag, a mounted Indian could furnish information as far as he could be seen.
5. Thomas Jefferson, when he was American minister to Paris.

was unable to make up his mind. Then, that evening, when he heard Sandy's harmonica, an idea flared in his mind. There was another thing he could do to show Sandy what would happen if Big P ever did need to use Bobcat again. The plan gave Rad what was a poor excuse for peace of mind, so that he managed to sleep a little that night.

Since he realized now that he hadn't been deceiving anybody about his visits to Bobcat, Rad beat even the wrangler up the next morning. In spite of his sincere intentions of turning the ranch over to Sandy, he had kept close tabs on things and knew exactly where to pick up the little cut of steers he needed. He found them not far from Bobcat flat and began to haze them toward the disputed range.

He discovered that nobody had been here from Yates' spread since yesterday, for the open gate still stood the way Rad had left it. All Rad did now was leave the steers there and ride home.

RAD was too restless to sit on the porch the next morning. He was down in the barn soaping his saddle when he heard the distant wail of a harmonica and knew that Sandy was coming in from the range. Stepping to the door, he saw the musical rider and mincing horse coming out of the creek brush by the ford. Sandy was slack in the saddle, heart and soul in his efforts, completely detached from what was happening to Big P. Rad muttered a curse.

He was suddenly aware of another sound, that of a horse pounding in from the distance. Sandy stopped his horse where he was, flung an uneasy glance at the house, then waited. Stepping back into the obscurity of the barn, certain Sandy had not seen him, Rad padded silently to the wall by the lane. He could see Sandy's worried face. A moment later Bernie Morts rode up to him.

"Sandy!" Bernie exploded, "there's a half dozen Big P steers, shot through the head, down near Bobcat."

"Not so loud, man!" Sandy breathed, but his face had turned white.

Bernie dropped his voice only slightly. "Great gaspin' catfish, Sandy! How much longer do we have to sit on our hands? Yates run them steers across to the Bobcat for the purpose of twisting your tail!"

"Yates likely shot 'em," Sandy said. "But Rad Prosser run 'em over there."

"Whichever!" Bernie howled, "it's one thing we can't let slide!"

"Bernie," Sandy said tiredly, "I told you how it is. Rad's been a fine father, but I was still a button when I first realized he didn't like me much. Nor trust me any. He turned this outfit over to me lock, stock and barrel because he knew it was the thing a real father ought to do. Then he kept closer tabs on me than if I'd been a thirty-a-month hand. Then he nudged and schemed and did little things, trying to get me to do just what he wanted and in the way he wanted. It goes square against my grain, but I can't quit him now the way he is. I can't even have it out with him proper with his heart weak and fluttery. But I can't stand his suspicions, either. So if you think I ain't staked over a barrel, you're crazy."

"Yeah," Bernie said. "But how about Yates?"

"If Rad had kept out of it," Sandy exploded, "I could have handled Yates. I didn't need to be told he was trying to see if he could get Bobcat away from me, when he couldn't from Rad. But bedamned if I could stand for Rad bootin' me into a fight with the cuss."

Bernie's mouth was making gasping motions. "What about them shot steers?"

"We'll skin 'em out," Sandy said, "and use what we can for beef."

"Good gravy!" Bernie moaned, then the two rode back toward the creek.

The guilt already working in Rad nearly floored him. For the moment it was Sandy's mother who vividly and immediately filled his mind. She'd always had a perverse streak in her. There would be spells when she'd buck him for the sheer cussedness of it. But why? She had never told Rad what Sandy had just blurted out to Bernie. Had it been be-

[*Turn page*]

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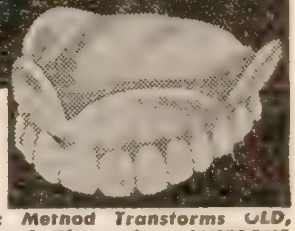

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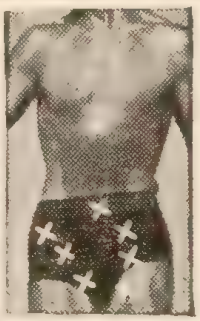

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cause he had tried too hard to run her, the way he had Sandy? Put the boot on the other foot, and Rad Prosser would have turned contrary. Especially if somebody had distrusted his courage and tried to kick him headlong into a fight.

If anybody had made an opening for Noah Yates to crowd into, Rad guessed that he had himself. His own ears had heard Sandy say he would have dealt with Yates by now, except for that foot in his seat.

Well, I made the mess, Rad told himself bleakly. I'll have to clean it up.

He got his horse and this time rode out boldly for Bobcat, confident that Sandy had gone up there with Bernie and aware that Yates would be watching the flat closely to see what would result from the new-made beef. As he rode under the hot morning sun, a new humility was in Rad. A man could get a jolt from seeing himself through another's eyes, as he just had. Like a bath in alum water, it was, shrinking a man back down to size. . . .

WHEN he topped the last rise short of the flat, Rad could see Sandy and Bernie below him. He could tell from the carcasses dotting the area about the springs that the steers had been dropped in their tracks while grazing. The two riders below had stopped by one of the dead steers, either talking or just sitting their saddles, thinking about Noah Yates. Or about Rad Prosser, who had parleyed a bad situation into a deadly one. Then Rad saw something else—a small rise of dust in the eastward distance. Somebody was coming from the direction of the Yates spread. The big showdown was on its way.

Rad rode on down to join Sandy and Bernie. Neither of them realized that he had been forewarned of the gruesome sight here. And neither spoke to Rad, both sitting stiffly, watching him with bleak eyes. In a kind of a gruff, quick prayer, Rad thought, This is the last time I'll ever scheme and crowd him but let it work this once . . .

He jerked his thumb, saying, "Some-

body's coming from Yates' place. You're going to make your stand now or tuck your tail in for keeps." Because he couldn't change his own stand without rousing Sandy's suspicions.

Sandy took a quick, startled look at the dust to the east. His glance swept back. "Rad, you get the devil out of here! You know damned good and well what the doctor said about excitement!"

"Where's there going to be any?" Rad grunted. "They'll tell us to get the hell off of their range, and we'll do it all meek and gentle."

"Bernie!" Sandy thundered. "Take him home!"

"Not me," Bernie said. "It's his own business."

Rad grinned and began to roll a cigarette, certain that as long as he was present Sandy wouldn't barrel on into the kind of berserk action Yates probably wanted from him. And Rad grew pretty sure of Yates' wishes in the matter for the man was leading the oncoming party, with four of his riders supporting him.

The five rode up without greeting. Yates was a scrawny man, unshaven, his black whiskers streaked with grey. He had hard eyes and a restless way of fidgeting in the saddle. He looked at Bernie, then at Sandy, ignoring Rad with an elaborate show of his newly-conceived contempt.

"What're you jiggers doing here?" he rasped.

Sandy's eyes had narrowed but his voice was mild. "Whose business is that?"

"Mine," Yates said, and spat. "You're trespassing on my range. Like your strays done. Keep your stock off, young Prosser, and your hands and yourself."

Rad could see the ridging muscles on Sandy's neck. But two things kept him from pulling his gun—the fact he had been egged on in that direction by his father, and Rad's physical condition. Rad found himself liking the orneriness in Sandy, but even more he liked his boy's concern for his bad heart. In this moment Sandy was coming through with something a lot finer than mere animal cour-

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age: Sandy was showing a moral fiber that had ten times its worth.

But Rad had no such concern for that heart. He had made this mess and he aimed to tidy it up himself. So he had to crowd things his way this one time. Because it was the way Sandy wanted it to go, too—it stood in naked hunger on the faces of Sandy and Bernie both.

"Noah," Rad said calmly, "I'm going to count to five. If you buzzards ain't dusting for Big P's east boundary by then, I'm going to start shootin' my gun. You know where that boundary is. A good mile east of where you've crowded your way."

Sandy started to speak but didn't. He realized that the die had been cast, that nothing could stop what had to come now. A wicked delight had leaped into Bernie's eyes. A crease broke the severity of Sandy's mouth.

"Still a tough old turkey, are you?" Yates snarled at Rad.

"One," Rad said. "Two—"

"But your kid's a yellow-belly!" Yates spat.

"Three," Rad answered. "Four—"

Five against three. The odds were good enough for Noah Yates. Rad's almost idle voice said, "Five," and then everybody was moving.

Sandy jumped his horse toward Noah Yates even as the man grabbed for his gun. And Sandy did it on the side that kept Rad from squeezing off the threatened shot. Bernie yelled a warning to Yates' riders, even as Sandy's horse crashed into Yates. But the boy had his enemy, and as the shaken animals broke apart, both men crashed free to the ground.

Rad swung his gun and shot just as a Yates rider started to draw. The gun dropped from the man's hand, and the fellow made a pained grab at his right forearm. Bernie's roaring gun blasted the hat from another's head. The wounded man swung his horse in sudden despair and cut out for the boundary. The hatless one forgot all about the gun he had tried to pull. The other two had made no bel-

ligerent move; now they folded their hands carefully on their saddle-horns.

BUT on the ground Yates still held onto his gun, was still trying to kill Sandy, who was relying solely on his bare hands. They rolled over and over. Yates was keeping the gun out of Sandy's reach, hunting his chance to use it. Rad's breath was so painful he feared a heart attack impended and would cut him down before he knew how Sandy was to make out. But Rad kept out of it, as did Bernie.

Then Sandy got hold of Yates' gun. He wrenched it from the man's hand, broke loose and climbed to his feet. He hauled Yates erect with his free hand.

"Man!" he panted. "You heard Rad say where the boundary line is. You'll cross it now, acknowledging that you know where it is. Or I'll hand you back your gun and it'll be between you and me. Rad, you count real good. Start over again, and up to five."

Yates pulled bluster onto his face, but it didn't have any glue on it. At the count of one he flung a look about to see that his men were looking mighty impartial under the cover of two Big P guns. At two he swallowed, and at four he started toward his horse . . .

"Well," Bernie said presently, "when are you going to keel over, Rad?"

"Been wondering myself," Rad admitted. But he felt fine. Yates and his men were trying to look casual as they rode off of Bobcat flat, but Rad knew that they wouldn't be back. Yates' resurgent ambition was doused, and when things had cooled a little, Sandy could present the man with a bill for the shot steers and have no trouble collecting.

"I've been trying to tell the doc for months I'm all right again," Rad said. "Now maybe he'll believe me." Sandy was poking around in the dust where he had fought with Yates. Suddenly he bent and picked up something shiny and dropped it into his shirt pocket. Rad grinned. It was that infernal harmonica. But Rad was glad he had found the thing. It sure made wonderful music. ● ● ●

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